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GILT-EDGE JOHNNY



OR,

Roldan and His Rovers.

The Story of the "Ranch Accursed."

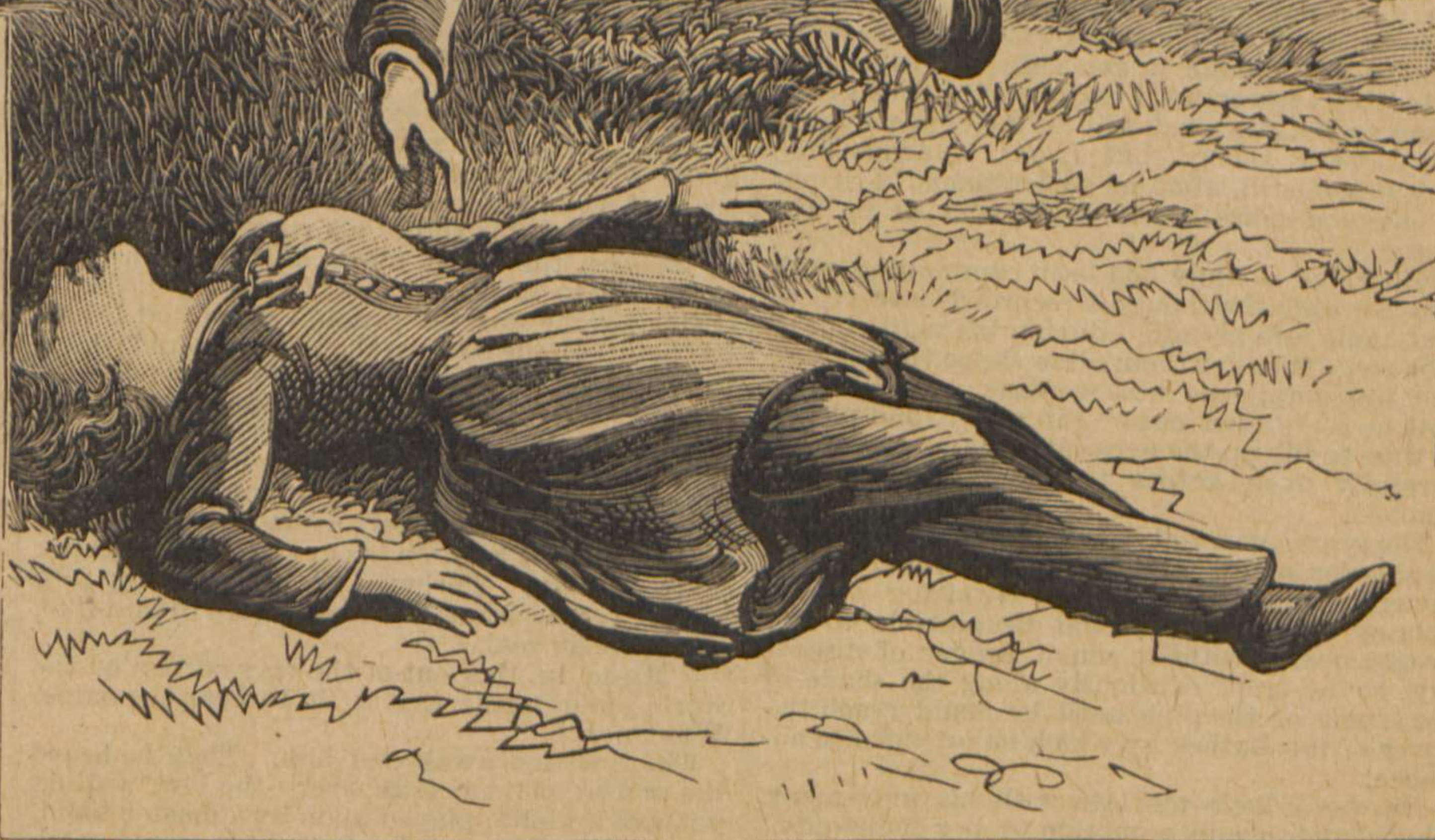
BY WM. R. EYSTER,
AUTHOR OF "HURRAH HARRY," "HANDS UP,"
"THE LIGHTNING SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LONE CAMP SCARCELY PROVES LONESOME.

As the sun dropped into the gash in the West where it usually retired to put on its night-cap, the moon arose, round and full, from behind the range of hills in the East, and lit up the long, level valley with almost the splendor of day. Eyes that were accustomed to looking around after dark would be able to see with about as much clearness as though daylight still lingered; and the average man, on a pinch, would have or could have, read ordinary print without the aid of spectacles.

In some such rather prosaic way ran the thoughts of John Atherton—better known among



SHE NOTED THAT A HAND TRAILED ALONG THE GROUND AS THE HORSE CAME BETWEEN HER AND THE UNCONSCIOUS MORGIANA.

his associates, when he had any, as Gilt-Edge Johnny—as he leaned against the giant pine under which he was standing, and looked and listened, with the air of one awaiting the coming of some one he was expecting to see.

"If he turns up to time," he thought, "I can't help but see him, and he couldn't miss the place if he tried. He could see it now as far as he could before the sun set; and if he couldn't, the trend of the valley would bring him right along. Of course, he may have had bad luck, or even passed in his chips; but the Daisy isn't one of the kind to die while the game is young, and the chances big. I reckon I can look for him to be about before long, and he might be in sight now."

But it was certain that "the Daisy," whoever he might be, was not in sight, and so, after another look over the valley, in which Atherton failed to see any moving figure, he dropped carelessly on the ground at the foot of the tree, and was on the point of drawing a pipe from his pocket when the sound of footsteps fell upon his ear.

Whoever approached was still at some distance, for the night air carried the sounds but faintly.

"Not so much alone as I thought; and not the Daisy, either," was the reflection of Gilt-Edge Johnny, who suffered the pipe to drop back into his pocket, while he straightened himself up in an attitude of listening.

"I would know his step in a hundred; and there are two of them coming if my ears don't deceive me. Must have been dreaming, that I didn't hear them before. Man and a boy, with a load of something between them, if I am not 'way off. What's in the wind, now? People who come prying around here this time in the evening, with a burden between them, generally have something to hide, and they are not anxious to meet strangers. It may be as well to keep quiet and let them go by. I have had enough of fight to last me for a twelvemonth. And yet—I don't know. Being so much out of the grooves myself it's a little queer that I should seem to have got a mission from fate to right what I can see is wrong. If I am not wide off there is something wrong here. I will have to find out what they are up to and make no mistake."

Johnny spoke rather passively, but that was his nature. He was not apt to get excited, even if he did see, in the moonlight, two persons carrying a corpse between them. He was curious—and something more, for it suddenly flashed upon him that this might be the body of his friend, whom he had spoken of as the Daisy. He crept a little further into the shadow of the trunk of the pine and watched the two, who approached to within a hundred yards, and then halted.

As they suffered their burden to drop to the ground Jack started a trifle. In the first place, he saw that the body was that of a female; in the next, that, when it touched the ground it seemed to vanish!

"Had the grave already dug, and they don't want to waste time over the obsequies. Looks as though there had been a murder. People who die in their beds are not buried by moonlight and without a coffin. Guess I would be justified if I let go at them; but then, that would only pile up a couple more corpses and I have no need of them. Odd, this; but, that's not a boy, either. A woman, as sure as you are born; and she seems to have the most nerve of the two! Wonder how she can keep her tongue still on such an interesting occasion? Not one of your ordinary girls, either, from the way she carries herself, and stands back to allow her humble friend to do the heavy part of the work; for which he don't seem to have the best stomach in the world. What a brilliant little romance there is here; and if I know myself it is one that I will know the beginning and the ending of before I am done with them. It is a way I have of picking up business where it is least expected; and though it generally makes me lots of trouble I never could help myself. The grave seems to be full; what will be the next move on the carpet? Lucky that Leo is hidden below; and, better still, that he understands he is not to make a noise when his master is on the watch."

Gilt-Edge Johnny had been communing with himself, and the thoughts recorded were those that came into his mind during his vigil; but it took some time for them all to shape themselves, and the man, who was working with a spade that he had taken out of the grave, had plenty of time to fill up the excavation, and smooth it carefully over, before the final question was reached.

The grave once full, the two stood silently by its side for a few minutes. The woman was in thought, and the man was awaiting orders. Johnny saw that it would be possible to approach nearer without much danger of discovery; so he crept cautiously along the shade of the trunk of the pine until he could reach the cover of the bushes by which he intended to advance.

He was a little too late with his movement. The woman made a motion to her companion. He turned, hid his spade in the bushes, and followed her as she glided away.

It was as she turned, that Jack had his first

good view of the woman's face; and though the distance was too great to see clearly he was certain that he would know those handsome features if he ever beheld them again.

Of course, for a few minutes, Atherton remained motionless. He knew that the two could not leave the place without at least one backward glance. Until that was taken he would be in danger of discovery. With such a secret behind them they must needs be sure that no one else shared it with them. It might be only instinct, but the glance was bound to come; and he hugged the ground tightly as he waited for it.

Sure enough, the woman did come to a halt, and gazed long and searchingly in the direction of the spot she had quitted.

If she had any suspicions, she saw nothing that would justify them. There was the silent sward, and the gloomy pine, with its long shadow, and the high rock towering up behind it. She was satisfied; and as she faced about, Atherton arose from the ground and followed silently, but with confidence.

Where had the two come from, and what was the meaning of the silent burial? The only time he had passed through this region, Johnny had noted cattle herding in the valley, and suspected that there were buildings not far away, yet he had believed the spot he had selected for a rendezvous was one not likely to be intruded on, and, least of all, by a woman such as was this one who had so coldly witnessed the interment of another of her sex.

"No Indian squaw, or peon slave is she," thought Johnny, as he watched the free step, and noted the outlines of the swaying form.

"If I had but one guess to make, I would say that she was a woman of wealth—one who belonged to what I suppose they would call the first circles, if there are any such in this benighted region. I'll bet you that when I see where she goes to, there will be a surprised young man. At the same time, it won't do to follow too far—unless I go back and leave a notice for the Daisy. I ought to have thought of that before I left the camp, though. If I go back now I will lose them, for sure, and it will take no end of time, perhaps, to get on their trail again. There must be a hacienda somewhere about here; but bless me if I ever saw it. Ah!"

This exclamation was uttered guardedly, and was caused by noting that the two had come upon a pair of horses, tethered and evidently waiting for them. They mounted and dashed off, leaving him to follow as best he could.

Johnny did not altogether give up the pursuit. He knew he could not hope to keep up with them long, but believed that he could see enough to learn their final course, so he called upon his legs to do their duty.

For a mile or more he trotted on in their wake, with much of the untiring speed of an Indian runner. Then he saw why it was that he had not seen the hacienda that now lay beneath him, on the plain, and toward which the two were making their way. The buildings were of great extent, and were located at the head of a side shoot from the main valley, so that they could not well be seen unless from a higher ground.

"That's it, is it?" muttered Johnny.

"Think I have run you to a hole, after all; and there is no use of going further. I wouldn't have much of an excuse for drifting around this time of night, and I don't know that I want to get inside very badly until I get some sort of an idea who lives there. I think I will go back to the pine and wait for the Daisy to turn up. I might be digging up that cadaver while I was waiting, though the party was dead enough, and I don't know that I have any use for her. Good-evening, my friends. It is just two to one that I will see you both, a little later, and longer odds yet that you won't want to see me when I come."

He waved his hand in a parting salute, and then retraced his steps.

As he went, the way seemed to be doubly lonely. There was not a trace of superstition about Atherton, and his nerves were as stout as those of any man living, but there was a newly-made grave at the end of his route, and the idea of passing the night alone, and in such close proximity to it was not cheerful, to say the least. On the right was the gradual slope that led to the plain; on the left was the rising ground which led up to the mountains. He was on the border line between settlement and solitude, and he felt like seeking the one or the other.

Nevertheless, when he reached the pine tree under which he had halted at sunset, he threw himself down as carelessly as he had then done, and resting his head on his arm began to think matters over. Perhaps he was falling into a doze, for the sounds he heard were dream-like, and scarcely real.

"Music in this out-of-the-way corner of the world—and music that is fit to bear the name. What next?"

The question awakened him. Then he heard the music plainer than ever—the low, wailing notes of a violin, played upon by a master hand. In the distance, too, he thought he could catch the glow of a low fire. He had neighbors, but of what kind he must find out. Without hesitation

he arose once more, and made his way in the direction of the sounds.

He had not far to go. Some one had made a camp there, that was certain; and though the shrubbery had partly concealed the light of the fire, he began to see it plainer before he had advanced a dozen yards. He also saw something else—a dark, skulking form, that was noiselessly drifting in the same way that he was going. Was it a crouching man or a beast of prey? The two are often synonymous names in that unsettled land, where murder is rife, and adventures always ready.

A second glance told that it was a cougar, and of the largest size. Whether it was attracted and pleased by the music which still rose and fell in fitful cadences, as though the fingers of the man were moving mechanically, or whether it was simply bent upon a meal, and was proceeding with care, it certainly acted with strange deliberation and caution. It halted; it crouched; it crept forward a step at a time, and then took a dozen with rapid strides. At last, it remained motionless, just at the edge of the clearer circle of light thrown by the little fire.

However it went, the man behind accommodated his pace to its progress. He knew something about the animal, and that its habits were unreliable. Sometimes the tiger of the South is a coward among all cowards, and sometimes it will fight at the drop of a chip. There was no certainty that it would not, if it once was made aware of his presence, turn and try to rend him.

But the beast had eyes only for the two forms that sat by the fire, and in spite of his uncanny neighbor, Jack looked in the same direction.

"Two of a kind on the same deal!" was his mental exclamation. "Another woman, as true as I'm a living sinner, and she is sporting the unmentionables, too. Would have taken her for a mighty good-looking boy if I hadn't had my eyes opened by the other one. A handsome face it is. What can she be doing here, I wonder? The old fellow looks as though his wits were wool-gathering, and like enough he is her father. I suppose she has come along with him as a guardian. She had better keep a stricter watch or our tiger will make one handsome damsel less. I believe, fire or no fire, the infernal brute is going to spring."

He had taken a quick glance back at the tiger, and there was enough in its movements to arouse such a suspicion.

The fire troubled it, and the music confused it, but it was bent on a meal, anyhow. Its face was turned toward the girl, and it had no ears for the man who was stealing on it from behind. It crouched lower, licked its chops with its long, red tongue, and tried its muscles to test if they were ready for the spring.

Once the hand of Atherton wandered to his revolver, but it was only a mechanical motion. It was doubtful if the ball the weapon carried was heavy enough to drop the beast in its tracks, and if it was not stunned in the outset its spring would carry it on the object it had in view. His hand moved along until it rested on the haft of his knife. Then he took half a dozen steps more, that brought him almost within reaching distance of the tiger.

Without warning the animal flung itself forward. It was like the sudden release of a spring—but Gilt-Edge Johnny went with it.

CHAPTER II.

THE MAD MUSICIAN.

At the very instant the tiger launched itself, Atherton buried his knife to the hilt in its neck. The blade was as keen as a razor, and the hand on the haft knew how to wield it to the best advantage. When the stroke came down the beast was dead, as far as theory could go.

But there was still motion which the severing of the spinal cord could not immediately stop. Johnny hung fast to his knife, and the knife stuck fast in the tiger. As a result, man and beast rolled over and over together, until they brought up at the very edge of the camp-fire.

By that time the dying flurry was over, and Jack, not at all the worse for wear, sprang lightly to his feet, and stood in front of the astonished couple. He shouted some word or so of warning as he arose, for there might be some danger that the man would be surprised out of his senses, and yet have the instinct to shoot. In that light it would not be so easy for a frightened man to tell the tiger from Jack, and in a chance *melee* the bullets generally go to the wrong spot, unless the man who sends them is an expert. Even then, accidents will happen.

The sport might have saved himself the trouble. The girl did give a little cry of alarm, and cower back, with her arms shielding her face, but the musician remained as stolid as though he was an automaton. His bow continued to wander idly over the strings of his violin, and save that he turned his eyes toward the two figures which had so suddenly appeared, he made no unwonted motion.

Seeing this Johnny turned again to the beast. It was now quite dead, and the gaping wound on the back of its neck showed how surely and how strongly he had struck.

The fright of the girl lasted but a moment. She dropped her hands into her lap, and looked up at Jack with a questioning gaze. He had expected that the speaking would begin from the other side, but the look seemed to call upon him for explanation, and he was never at loss for words. He drew the knife once or twice across the back of the Tiger, to clean the blade, and then straightened himself up.

"Guess you will pardon the intrusion, but I couldn't otherwise stop him, and so we came together. Not a very pleasant customer to have stalking you. The brute will follow a man for a hundred miles if they once take the notion for fresh meat from that particular quarry. It was lucky I came wandering along this way, and saw how his mind was made up. Guess there are no more of the breed about; but, this is not a very safe way of spending the night. I would advise you that you either hunt a house, or keep up a bigger fire, when the night comes along."

While he was speaking Jack was paying attention to the man. From what he had already seen Atherton had decided that he was an American, and that he was, to say the least, a little daft. Whether he was a raving maniac, or only moon-struck, as it were, was the question he desired to solve as soon as possible.

For the average man, Gilt-Edge Johnny felt no awe, no matter under what circumstances he might be met, but he hated to deal with a lunatic. When one of that class raises his hands there is a terrible uncertainty what he is going to do. He may be going to embrace you or he may be going to cut your throat.

The music of the violin went on, sounding more ghost-like than ever, and while Johnny waited for the reply which did not come he had a good opportunity to look the violinist over.

He was a fine looking man, of perhaps forty years of age; or, it might be, ten years more. His face was the face of a student, and his air was that of a man who had stood at some time high in the social scale. His clothing was of the rough order that is met with in a mining frontier, and his hands, though slender and delicately shaped, showed traces of the labor they had performed. His hair was long, but carefully kept, and a heavy beard almost concealed his face.

The girl broke the silence that followed the close of Jack's address.

"Thank you, a thousand times, both for what you have done for us, and for the advice that no one knows better than I do, is for our good. If father could only be induced to follow it! But, when the labor of the day is over he feels as though he must spend all the time he can with his beloved instrument. That might annoy some people; and there are others for whom he says it would be desecration to play. And so we pass the night in our own cabin, if we have one; and when we must, we pass the hours under the stars. We have wandered far and wide, father and I, in our prospecting, and this is almost the first time that harm or danger came nigh to us. Yet it should be a warning."

"Well, prospectors can't always pick the kind of quarters they would like. I know something about that, myself, for I have been there. But it is not exactly the kind of life for a young lady. It would be better if you could be left at some headquarters until a strike has been made, and your father has that cabin you speak of to put you in over night. This sort of thing will take the bloom off of your youth about as fast as anything you can think of. And this country may have rich indications, but it's a bad one to prospect in. If you struck it ever so rich it would all go to the other fellow, and you would be lucky if you got away with your life. Talking by card, again. I have the reputation of being able to hold on to what I get as well as the next man, but I passed out on as big a stake as I ever saw on the board, and I'm waiting, now, to see whether my pard has only been crippled, or has passed in his chips for good. By the way, if you meet the Daisy anywhere near here, and he is inquiring for me, please tell him that I am around, and on time. He should have been on hand to-night, but, somehow, he has failed to materialize."

While he rattled on Jack glanced from father to daughter, and then to father again. Now that he had a close view of them, he could note the strong resemblance of the features of the two, and he did not think of questioning the relationship of which the girl had spoken.

He understood the whole story that she had to tell. Slender and weak as she looked, alongside of her stalwart father, she was the protector. Where he wandered she went; bad as things might be she had the haunting dread that in her absence they might be worse.

At last the violinist began to understand that he had a visitor. He dropped the instrument from his chin, and transferred the bow into the other hand. Then he motioned to a log beside the fire.

"Sit down, sir. These are strange quarters for a Janvrin, but such as they are you are welcome to them. Sorry, sir, that we have no refreshments to offer; but Morgiana and I had a good appetite, and when supper was over we cleared the larder. That was well done, my young friend, and you have our thanks. Strange

that the beast should be insensible to the power of music; and, stranger still that we should find a friend where we thought ourselves so entirely alone. Strange; and yet, perhaps, not altogether for the best. We want to be alone, Morgiana and I; yet how can we rid ourselves of one who has done us such a service, without seeming to be churlish? It is a question that I shall have to study over. Can you help me to its solution?"

The appeal was made in perfect good faith, and as Johnny had a profound sense of the ludicrous it was a little hard for him to keep from laughing outright.

"Don't trouble yourself, judge. A man is bound to have some luck in his life, if it only comes to him in the shape of John Atherton. I was on hand when I was needed, and I shall skip out again as soon as I have made myself sure that there is nothing further that I can do to add to your comfort or well-being. As for supper, I had mine hours ago, and washed it down with good spring water. In the absence of coffee that same is good enough for me. I had gone into camp for the night when I heard the sound of your violin, and being something of a musician myself I couldn't help strolling this way. But I am tired with a long tramp, and must be up and moving at an early hour in the morning, so that I cannot stay with you another moment without doing both of us an injustice. As for the man-hunter, there—if I had not taken him off, when he got done with you he would have been just as apt as not to come back on me; and I couldn't have slept a wink if I had known that he was prowling around, seeking whom he might devour. I might have been a mustang out, if no worse."

"Yes, yes, I understand. You are one of those men who make light of a great service, and treat life as a stupendous joke. Better to be a laughing philosopher if you can; but I am not made in that way. You called me, 'judge.' Have we ever met before?"

"Not to my knowledge; but I am not sure that I have not heard of you, though I would never have expected to come across you 'way down here. I suppose you are not open to good advice?"

"No, sir. Advice that is not paid for is worth but little. That was the rule in the profession, and I have faith in its truth. At present I am too poor to accept advice and not sure enough of my knowledge to give it."

"But there is no reason why you should not listen to it, even if you should not care to follow it," interposed the girl, starting forward.

"We are his debtors already; why not add to the indebtedness, in the hope that some day we will be able to pay it all off together?"

"Nonprofessional, my dear, and—but what am I doing? Accept our thanks, Mr. Atherton, and retain your advice for those who will be more likely to appreciate and to follow it."

And with that the judge seemed to consider the conversation closed. He tucked the violin once more under his chin, drew the bow softly over the strings, and was again lost to all that was around him.

"You will pardon us for any seeming rudeness," began the girl in a low voice. "Indeed it is not meant for anything of the kind. We may meet again, and then—"

She came to a full stop, as though not knowing what else to say, and Jack hastily broke in. "Not a word more. It has made me very happy to be of a little service, and if, at any time, you need me, and can let me know, I shall be glad to put myself at the disposal of you or your father. Try and get him away from this country. If you can't, say your prayers, and hope for the best."

He was evidently going, and Morgiana held out her hand. Jack took it quietly, gave it a gentle shake, and then walked away.

"I have no particular use for my dead tiger," he thought, as he strode from the spot, "and I swear I don't want to make myself ridiculous dragging it off by the jaw. I'll let it lay there, and maybe, when the old gentleman sees it by daylight, it will give him something to think about besides that violin. But, all the same, I think I will keep an eye toward the camp as long as I have one open."

Jack, after looking at his mustang, got back to his pine tree without interruption, and threw himself down once more under its sheltering limbs; but this time he did it without interruption. It is true, he now and then caught the flicker of the low-burning camp-fire, and could hear at times the soft strains of the distant violin; but these gradually faded away from eye and ear, and he slept the sleep of the well-tired. It was day-break when he awoke.

CHAPTER III.

DANGER IN THE DISTANCE.

"No signs of the Daisy," thought Jack as he opened his eyes, and perceived that he was alone.

"It will be kind of lonesome sitting around here all day; and if he don't turn up soon I don't think I shall run the risk of doing it. A fellow may as well look around and see what the country is like. I never struck the location

yet that I couldn't get up a bit of an adventure on the shortest notice if I looked for it, and I don't suppose the little ripples of last night have exhausted the supply. There is that ranch to look after; and the man with the fiddle to take notes on. Between the two I ought to find something to occupy my spare time till the Daisy comes. I'll just put up a notice that I've been on the ground, and that if I don't turn up again to-day I will to-morrow some time. Then I will get my breakfast, and go out on the war-path. I know there are two women, at least, in this part of the world, and either of them, if looks go for anything, would be worth the cultivating. Only, the one has a little too much of the tiger in her to trust without watching. Wonder if she owns the ranch? If she should turn out to be a widow, now, there might be a chance to settle down. And from the work she was engaged in last night it might be that the settlement would be too permanent to be agreeable! Ahem! I guess I will proceed with all due caution when we approach the presence of the widow."

Of course he was speaking by way of a jest, for even to him the idea of Gilt-Edge Johnny settling down had a pretty large element of the ridiculous in it. So he laughed at the thought, and overhauled his knapsack, which was slenderly stocked, but contained enough to save him from any immediate danger of starvation. The water he had spoken of to the judge was found pure and plenty in a spring not a hundred yards away from the tree; so with his drinking-cup and provisions he made an adjournment thither. Then he hopped his mustang, which was hidden near by, so that it would not wander too far, and turned it out to graze. After that he satisfied his appetite.

"Wonder whether I should have invited my neighbors to breakfast?" he thought, as he filled his pipe, and threw himself lazily back to enjoy a smoke.

"They seemed to intimate that their larder was about empty, and tiger-steak would be mighty tough eating without any side-dishes to hide its quality. Would go over and make a tender of the remnants, if I was not afraid of arousing the old gentleman's ire. Don't want to intrude on his solitude, but in the interests of the young lady it might be my duty to see which way they turn their steps. He may stay in the mountains a month, prospecting—and it's a safe bet he finds nothing—he never does."

As if in answer to his thoughts he could hear the sounds of the violin once more, in the direction of the camp of the strange pair; and the slow, mournful cadences did not seem to indicate that the musician was possessed with any great desire for an immediate move.

"Still in camp, eh! Guess this is one of his off days. Probably they have finished their frugal repast, and the young lady is putting away the dishes to the sound of the music. The old gent may have a theory. Introduce an orchestra to the kitchen, and have every dish washed in time to the measure. Wouldn't be so bad; but if he wants to save money he had better learn to play something more lively. The Fisher's Hornpipe, for instance, would rattle them away at a great rate; but to that tune they would hardly get them out of the road in time for a late tea. In fact, I think I would sooner stop to listen if I was employed in the culinary and bottle-washing department. Astonishing how he does make it take hold. There are worse things to do than to lie here at one's ease and listen."

With nothing else to do Jack really was able to enjoy himself. Judge Janvrin was a musician of no mean order when he settled himself fairly to business. Even when his fingers were idly straying over the strings the harmony that he made was wonderful; and now and then he played selections from the old masters after a fashion that showed he was familiar enough with them all.

An hour went by, then another. Jack had filled his pipe several times, and had listened to the melodious strains until they had grown monotonous—sweet though they were. He could see far down the long, level reach of the valley, and for the most of the time his glances were turned in that direction. When the pard for whom he was waiting should come, he would probably cross that valley, and Atherton would have been glad to see him. Once, he went and looked at the grave he had seen filled the night before.

It was not easy to find the spot—or it would not have been had he not had the bearings so exactly. It was as level as the rest of the ground, and had been covered so carefully that but little sign of any recent disturbance could be seen.

"I swear, it is getting tiresome!" he exclaimed, as he looked down the valley for the hundredth time at the least.

Near by, save his mustang, there was no living thing in sight, though what seemed to be miles away he could see cattle wandering about in small bunches, the advance guard of a great herd that was coming into sight from the side valley at the head of which lay the ranch he had noted on the previous night. There might be herdsmen with them, but so far he had seen no

sign of a human being. Had it not been for the music that rose and fell on the morning air he would have felt very much alone.

He was thinking so when he became aware that the music had ceased. That reminded him that he had not heard it for some time.

"The dishes are washed, and the orchestra has ceased from its labors; what is the next move on the carpet?"

As he asked the question he glanced in the direction of the camp and caught sight of two figures gliding away from the spot, and evidently making their way toward the valley.

On the move, eh? Wonder where they are going? They must have a spot in view, and they would hardly have started so late if they had intended to make anything of a day's journey. Wonder if they could be going to the ranch behind the hill? That may be a safe place to visit; but from what I saw last night appearances are against it. If that is their striking point, blessed if I don't make it convenient to ride the same way. I can keep an eye on both parties, and if there is any fun going, will be sure to get it. I always do."

From the direction that the judge and his daughter were taking, it would require a long time to get out of sight, so Jack was deliberate in his movements. He looked over to his belongings; stowed some things about him, and carefully concealed others; scratched the notice to his pard, that he had so long been threatening to write, and pinned it to the trunk of the pine.

By that time the two were fully a mile away, and heading as though they intended to pass across the valley obliquely. Atherton could now guess that they were aiming for a peak or two in the opposite range of hills, that loomed up miles away, and shook his head, as he watched them plodding along.

"If he is the prospector he says he is—and because he is crazy is no reason why he should not be—I can see just the spot they are going to strike. And a likely enough place it is for the business, but I don't think I am far enough gone on Miss Morgiana to want any of it in mine. My late experience has been perfectly satisfactory. If there is ore there they can find alongside of it every detrimental, from tigers by the ton to wild Indians in war-paint by the tribe. And whatever wealth they may find will turn out to belong to some throat-cutting Don, who has a patent for all the land this side of purgatory that will give a title good enough against all the world except some Don who carries a bigger knife. Go, then, and luck go with you! If you keep in that direction I shall turn my attention to the hacienda, and the maiden who has established a private graveyard."

Nevertheless, he followed somewhat in their wake, watching their moving figures, which seemed to be gradually lessening in size rather than to be increasing the distance. If he had known how to stop that tramp he would have done so for the sake of Morgiana; but he recognized the fact that interference could do no good, and the only thing for him to do was to leave them to their own devices.

"And yet, it's a hard life for a girl who is as delicate, as dainty, even, as she is. I wouldn't wonder if the old wretch would make her cover twenty miles to-day, and that would be no joke for a man. Wouldn't fancy it myself unless there was a propelling power in the shape of a band of Apaches, or a mob of cut-throat Greasers, and I had left my irons at home. How the old fellow lives is a mystery. Didn't seem to have any shooting irons, or sense enough to use them if they were in his fists. He can't do much in the game line, and I'll swear they haven't got big enough budget about them to keep a crow with a healthy appetite for a week. He seems to have the sublimest trust in Providence, without ever having heard the other part of the maxim, about keeping his powder dry. He will go under, sure enough, one of these days, when another tiger comes his way, and Gilt-Edge Johnny is not around to chip in, regardless. Looks—yes, I swear! There is trouble on the trail even now. Can't the old fool see it?"

He halted suddenly, threw up his hand, and then choked back a warning shout that trembled on his lips, as he realized that the distance was too great for the two to hear any cry that he might utter. He looked down the valley, and then once more at the two who still plodded along, totally unconscious of danger that was coming like a whirlwind, though still a mile away.

CHAPTER IV.

CAUGHT AMONG THE CATTLE.

THE hacienda which Gilt-Edge Johnny found, was better known by reputation than by actual observation. It nestled among the hills, though at the head of the valley; and, save its dependencies, there were no other buildings within miles of the spot. Long ago it had its neighbors, but they were of the wild, Indian race; and the valley had seen blood run more than once when the place was hotly attacked, or closely besieged. For that reason it was more of a fort than a dwelling in its appearance; and perhaps more resembled an old-time castle—on a small scale—than either.

A score or so of resolute men could hold its front and sides against an army; and its rear was built upon the edge of a *barranca*, which dropped downward in a wide gash that touched bottom at a thousand feet.

Though the Indians had made no demonstrations for a number of years, and, indeed, were of late seldom seen in the neighborhood, the building was well manned, and a semblance of discipline still kept up. If Johnny had approached it in the moonlight, it is more than likely that he would have been challenged before he got within a hundred rods of the huge doors that generally closed the main entrance after night had fallen.

In spite of this fact, one would have said, after going over the place, and noting everything that was to be seen, that the arts of peace, rather than of war, prevailed at the Ranch of the Golden Dream. There were traces of an attempt at agriculture to be seen; and on the *pampas* that stretched away for miles, there were cattle by the thousand, which bore the brand of Donna Eleena. It was a shrewd guess that Atherton made when he spoke to himself of the proprietor as perhaps being a widow.

This morning, if Jack had only been at his coign of vantage of the night before, he might have seen a dashing-looking equestrian of the feminine gender ride away from the entrance, followed closely by an escort of one, who bent somewhat grimly forward in the saddle, and looked neither to the right hand nor to the left.

It was no race, and yet, as the senorita looked over her shoulder, the expression of her face told that she would not be sorry to leave her companion behind.

But both were well mounted, and though Eleena had the advantage in the outset, the two gradually drew together; whether from the slackening of the pace of the one, or the increase of that of the other, it might have been hard for an observer to say. At all events, the two for a time rode side by side, without a word being said by either.

To this out-of-the-way retreat there were sometimes visitors, and none of them had ever gone away without saying, aloud or to himself, that the fair proprietress was one of the most beautiful women it had ever been his fortune to see. She was over rather than under the medium height, and had as perfectly a rounded and developed figure as health, exercise and fresh air, assisted by fairly generous living, could give her. But outside of her magnificent figure, which is what the general eye first looks at, she had a face that had not yet lost the bloom of early womanhood, widow though she might be, and her features were as perfect as any that the Mexican sun had ever shone on. They were charming even now, as she turned toward her companion with what was intended to be a frown.

"There is no one near to hear thee, why must thou be still, Sanchez, the Silent? Sanchez, the Speaker, would be the more to my taste. What is it that is on thy mind? Speak out plainly, for once, and have done with hints that are promise or threat as one may choose to understand them."

As she spoke Eleena drew in her horse, and planted herself directly in front of the person she had addressed as Sanchez, the Silent. Her eyes flashed a little more than usual and she looked like one who thought she was doing a thing not altogether safe, but the consequences of which she was ready to face.

Sanchez had the choice of either coming to a halt also, or of deflecting his steed to one side or the other. He chose the former, and sat motionless, gazing into the face of the other with a stare that might have been disconcerting to a stranger, or one less careless of the opinions of others.

As far as looks went, Sanchez was a typical Mexican Don. He was little, if any, taller than his companion, and in spite of a strangely stolid expression in his face, there was a look in it of power—and perhaps of power for evil. A heavy, drooping mustache shaded his mouth, but there was a hungry gleam in the fierce black eyes that showed he was not altogether indifferent to the tone in which Eleena had addressed him.

Still, he did not speak, though one side of his mustache raised slightly, in what might have been interpreted as a smile; and there was the shadow of an upward movement of his chin.

"Am I mistress of my own house, or am I not? Do you own me, body and soul? Because the same blood runs in our veins, diluted somewhat, thank Heaven! on my side, am I to be your slave? For both of us the hacienda is too small. There must be a change, and a great one, or one or the other of us must go."

"Hum!" said the silent one, and the nose went upward to about the same elevation it had reached before.

"Oh, I am in earnest. It has been on my mind to speak of this, oftentimes before, and if I have not done so it has been because I could not then master the courage. But, to-day, I am desperate. You follow me like a nightmare, and overawe me with your mystery. I am only alone when I sleep; and sometimes I am not so sure of that. I must be rid of thee at any cost, or I shall some day go mad to see what kind of a shadow I cast."

"Visitors to the Ranch of the Golden Dream come but seldom, yet it is as well to run no risks. The honor of the family belongs in my charge, of right, and I will see that it is never tarnished through fault of thine. Canst thou say that there are no secrets of the ranch which an unwilling tongue might still let fall? When thou art in danger of letting thy tongue run away with thee, look at Sanchez, the Silent, and be hushed."

"Then, you have no idea of ever ending this surveillance? Is there no fear in thy mind that one day I will end it, and in a way that will be as sudden as effectual? If not, be warned, now. The time is coming when the shock will have broken the force of its freshness, and then one or the other of us may die. Better death than life like this."

The sneer beneath the heavy mustache was more perceptible than ever.

"Have it as thou wilt. Sanchez seldom speaks save when spoken to, and if he then utters anything unpleasant the fault is not his. And for death—it may come to one of us; but it will not be to Sanchez. Remember! Thou art likely to meet men from the outside world at any time. Beware that no hint of these thoughts reaches their ears. The Ranch of the Golden Dream will remain, and Sanchez will still live; but from that moment its master or its mistress will be a new one, and thou wilt be gathered to thy fathers. Thy threats trouble me not, so long as they refer but to the body, but a slip of the tongue will be death where thou standest."

Very even was the speech of Sanchez, without heat or horror in it, but that it meant more, even, than the simple words expressed could not be doubtful.

"Thou art sure, then, that the fates send long life to thee, and a short one to me? From the chances of the past it might look as though thou wert right. Yet there comes an end to all things in course of time, and perhaps thy hour is at hand. If it must be so I am ready to match my chances with thine, and stand the hazard of the die. Canst thou say as much?"

"Fool! Fate is exhausted so far as I am concerned. There is a way to rule fate, and I have found it. Where thou wouldst perish I would go through unscathed. I would have taught thee much if thou hadst been willing to learn, but that time has now gone by. If thou must have more proof, call upon me for it when thou wilt and the answer shall be ready."

Eleena looked around her. This companionship was no new thing, but this morning it was peculiarly distasteful to her. She knew that an ordinary gallop would never shake off her attendant, and just now she was ready for something desperate.

Perhaps her glance about was caused by noises and distant confusion which the interest in the conversation had previously prevented her taking notice of. She saw now that there was a movement on foot which might give her the escape that she longed for, and the excitement that she craved.

A quarter of a mile away dark bands of cattle were beginning to stream by; sometimes galloping wildly, and then halting to look backward, with upturned noses, and every nerve and muscle tingling. Behind them, and at some little distance, the main herd was pressing forward with the momentum of an avalanche. What might be still in the rear she could only guess, for though she heard shots and cries, and could see some of the *vaqueros* far back on the flanks, yet she could not tell whether there was a fight going on, or whether the noises were made in the effort to turn the cattle.

All she was certain of was that the herd, in all its thousands, was away in a wild stampede.

"Ha, ha!" she exclaimed, turning to Sanchez once more, with a look of exaltation.

"Thou has spoken of proof, and hast laughed at fate. She gives now the chance to show what thou art made of. We may go to death; and we may only go to save to the Ranch of the Golden Dream a few hundred head of cattle. However it may turn out, there can be no question of the danger. Follow me and see if both shall come out of this alive!"

She struck sharply with the keen little raw-hide whip which she held in her hand, and turned the head of the mustang quartering down the valley as it sprung away. She could now show a reason for the race that she had decided on, since she intended to head the herd!

The mustang bounded away like an arrow, as though aware of the business on which he was being sent, and close at his heels followed the one ridden by Sanchez, the Silent. If the challenge was recklessly made it was somberly accepted, and each knew well enough that there was more than a little danger in the mission on which they had started.

So entirely had Eleena been occupied with the conversation with Sanchez, and subsequently with the stampeding herd, that she had not noted a brace of moving dots on the plain, which grew and grew in size, till now she suddenly saw two persons on foot, and directly in the course of the flying cattle!

As yet they had not noticed their danger, and were toiling along, side by side—seemingly, a

man and a boy. The head of the herd was still a quarter of a mile from them, and the main body, or the front ranks of the main body, were further off; but the danger was none the less imminent. The stampede was coming in a V shape, the point to the front, but the base of the triangle was rapidly broadening, and long enough before the two pedestrians could get beyond its reach it would be apt to be upon them.

There are few persons at all acquainted with the great herds of the plains who are not aware that to face one of them on foot is almost certain death, even if the cattle are in their ordinary state at the time the experiment is tried. The leaders may indeed try to draw back; but there is an irresistible force behind, that would push them forward however pacific might be their intentions; and they would prefer going straight over the unaccustomed object in their way, to attempting to resist the pressure.

A horseman they know, understand, and fear; but while they may have some curiosity in regard to a footman, he is only an object to be blotted out if he comes in the way.

This in their calmest mood. But when the craze of the stampede is at work, even a horseman had best look well to his going before he ventures too near to the head of the assimilated monster. Once caught, entangled, made part of the one great unit, and a misstep means death; an accidental toss of a long horn the annihilation of the life of the horse or rider.

Yet riders who know their business, and whose lungs and muscles are equal to the emergency, cast themselves at the moving mass of concentrated and deadly cruelty without fear, and eventually accomplish what is really little less than a miracle. Sometimes the result is speedily reached; and sometimes it takes room enough to cover a whole county.

There was little thought of these things in the mind of Eleena as she urged her mustang to its best speed, and rapidly overhauled the advance of the the routing herd. Once aware of the danger to the two wayfarers, and her thoughts were centered on them. It was something to take her mind from Sanchez, and the subject of the late conversation; and it would be hard to say that she did not in truth hail their appearance with something like enthusiasm. The chances were against her, and yet she had firmly willed that they should be saved. After that there was a strange exultation in the mad gallop.

A few minutes would probably decide it. This was her thought as she looked at the two, and saw at last that one of them at least had noted the danger; and it was then that, for the first time, she suspected that one was a woman. Something in the attitude of Morgiana, as she halted, and clutched the shoulder of her father, revealed the sex which had been hitherto hidden under the boyish costume.

"Of what sort is he made?" thought the Donna, as she saw Janvrin turn slightly and survey the approaching host with what must have been a vacant stare.

"Is he mad, moonstruck, or ecstatic? Does he not know danger when he sees it; or is he tired of life? Yes, it is a girl; and she is overcome with the sight of the coming danger. Holy Maria! She has sunk to the ground, and he calmly walks on, careless of her fate! He may escape, perhaps; but unless I save, for her there is certain death."

And just then a hundred head of flying cattle gave an extra burst of speed, forging ahead so that their necks lay level with that of her mustang, and she had the longest side of the triangle to cover. What chance was there for Morgiana?

CHAPTER V.

AS TOUGH AS WHALEBONE.

DONNA ELEENA had been riding at racing speed, and yet the herd had been gaining.

For this there was a simple explanation. They were headed along the center of the valley, while she had struck in from the side, and so had to cover almost three yards to their two to retain the advantage of position with which she had seemed to start. Had she ever looked to the rear she would have seen how she was being overhauled, and would have seen, too, something else.

Sanchez had chosen not to follow directly in her wake. He was a little the better mounted, and he struck straight for the herd, noting that by so doing there would be some advantage in the ground over which he would have to go. He was every whit as cool as Eleena—cooler, perhaps—and was taking the risks without a thought of the danger.

But the cattle were going very fast. Those in the front tossed their horns and kicked up their heels in a mad fury; but those of the main herd who could be seen were grimly settled to their work, bunched compactly together, and running with heads held low. Before he knew it they outflanked him; closed in on him; followed him like an avalanche of living power. He was caught in the toils, or so near it that he had but a moment to decide. He might yet escape by a hasty retreat toward the side of the valley from which he had started; but unless he made the

effort at once, it would be too late, and there would be nothing for him to do but to drift on ahead of the mass as long as he could, until chance saved him, or fate slew him.

But Eleena saw nothing of this. She was riding as desperately, but as yet was in safety, and had the bare chance of being able to do something toward carrying into effect the half-formed scheme with which she started. Her lungs were strong for a woman, and she carried a pair of revolvers. With voice and shots she might cause the head of the column to swerve.

If once the deflection was started, there would be that much more in her favor. The herd is something like a regiment of soldiers. They keep up a sort of touch of the elbow, and dress on their markers. If they have the power to do it, they yield to the push of the leaders, and may be forced into a circular path until the madness of the stampede exhausts itself.

To accomplish anything like this takes time and space, and Morgiana lay right in the present track, and not very far away. The silver spur of the Donna was reddened with blood from the flank of her mustang, and her whip fell with a vicious swish as she urged the animal along. There were long odds on the race, but she had not as yet decided that she would lose. Her horse responded to her call, and fairly seemed to fly. He knew what was wanted, and if any aid that he could give would bring success, she would not fail.

At last she was where the real work could begin. Quartering down on the leaders, at a rate that she hardly had thought possible, Eleena whipped out one of her revolvers and fired at the nearest, with a precision that showed how cool she could be, and what a perfect mistress of her weapon she was. Struck just behind the fore-shoulder, the animal pitched forward, stumbled, struggled, and then was down for good.

It was now that chance, or fate, had the opportunity to play its part—and one or the other came to her aid. If the next steer to the rear had gone straight ahead, and over its fallen companion, or if it had veered to the left, toward Eleena, her work would have ended, then and there.

Instead, it surged to the right, and the rank not being too closely formed, yielded, obliquely, edged away from the woman whose revolver was spouting fire, and whose throat was strained to its utmost in uttering the cries with which she reinforced the noise of her weapon. The leaders, at least, were started in a new direction, and Morgiana lay not twenty yards from where they turned.

Eleena saw her, and then, for the first time, gave a glance to the rear.

There was a chance and that was all. The main drove was perilously near, spreading out widely on either side, and just in front of them, sitting erect in the saddle, and riding as though on parade, came Sanchez.

It would be folly for her to think of dismounting to help the prostrate girl. If she was senseless then there was nothing more to be done for her. Could she spring into the saddle behind Eleena there was perhaps time for the mustang, heavily weighted as it would be, to carry the two beyond the reach of danger—but a glance again at the girl showed no sign of life or motion. The only hope for her was perilous to the two; but Eleena had just decided with lightning like rapidity that she must make one wild effort to turn the broad, dark mass of rushing madness, and if that failed to abandon the unconscious woman to her fate.

"Don't you do it!"

The voice rung out clear and firm, almost at her side, and the sound, coming so unexpectedly, was more of a shock than a relief; but she had only time to turn her wrist once more, to bring her mustang's head again to the front, when, what, at first view, seemed like a riderless horse, flitted by her. Then she saw a knee above the saddle, and knew that a man hung low on the opposite side.

She noted that a hand trailed along the ground as the horse came between her and the unconscious Morgiana.

"Houp la!" shouted Gilt-Edge Johnny, rising into his seat once more.

"Now, follow your leader! It was a mighty brave thing for you to try to do; but a woman has little business in a stampede like this! Get out of the draft, so I can give you the girl, and then I'll stop your herd for you, if you want it; but you don't want to waste time here."

He knew that Eleena was close in his wake, and flung the words back at her to keep her near. He had seen that Sanchez was in peril; but for the present he had his hands full with Morgiana, whom he had so deftly snatched from the ground. Better do one thing well than to fail in the attempt to do two.

"She's neither dead nor hurt," he said, a moment later, when they were beyond the track of the coming swath.

"If that is a friend of yours I can tell you he is in some danger, coolly as he takes it. Take the girl, and I'll ride in to cheer him up a little with company. We may make the rifle; and if anything happens to me, bury my fragments, and give my love to the Daisy."

Hastily he transferred the still unconscious

girl to the arms of the Donna, and then ambled back toward the herd.

In his time, Gilt-Edge Johnny had played many parts, and the role of a cowboy was not unfamiliar to him. Moreover, he knew that his horse understood the work as well as he did himself. He took a leisurely survey to see how the land lay, and then went at his work with a will.

Sanchez was the disturbing element, that he would have been glad to see eliminated if it could be done without a sacrifice of his life. If he continued in his present position there was a chance that he would be caught by the flank of the drove if it doubled over.

"By heavens! he must take his chances," muttered Jack. "I believe the infernal fool is actually enjoying his ride. If he wanted to do it the idiot could put on steam enough to carry him off to the side. He is no heavy weight, and that animal looks as though it was going well within itself. It would be touch and go, perhaps; but better to try that than to float along where, the first little snag he hits he goes under forever. But, he has plenty of sand; and I wouldn't stare if he turned around and offered to fight the whole gang. Here goes, anyhow! If he gets caught in the jam it's his own blessed fault!"

Jack was going to try the same tactics that Eleena had essayed, and it may be that he did Sanchez an injustice because he was more or less in the way. The flanks of the herd were widening out and forging ahead, so that at present the mass presented a concave front. Perhaps the Silent One simply recognized the fact that he could not escape, and that it would be safest to bide his time, making no useless effort, and husbanding his resources until the supreme moment should arrive.

Yelling like a demon, shooting, and riding up to the very flank of the outermost steer, Atherton did his work so well that the oblique movement started, although the wild terror of the herd had not left it.

Looking toward Sanchez, Jack saw that he had taken note of what was going on, and had pushed his horse to a little higher speed, so as to give more room between himself and the cattle. As yet he could do nothing to assist in the work; and all that he could hope for was to keep himself out of harm's way until the work was sufficiently done by some one else to enable him to slip away from the track of the bovine tornado.

"Not as big a fool as he looked," thought Jack, who had eyes for everything.

"He is willing that I should take the bulls by the tails and swing them off his track; and he is going to try to give me room to do it in. I am getting along as well as could be expected; but, mighty souls! It's a contract."

The race kept on; and little by little it veered to the right, not yet leaving a circular track behind, though the change toward the ellipse was enough to encourage the one man pitted against the thousands of brutes.

"Good for him! He rides like a Centaur; and beats the Old Boy for judgment. He is coming my way, after all. He's not yet out of the woods, and he must remember that in this game slips don't go over; but luck for a minute more will fix him all right. If we two can get together, and he will help, we can round up the brutes to the queen's taste, and the satisfaction of the little woman over yonder, who is waiting to see it done."

Sanchez must have had the faculty of looking one way and seeing another, for he saw what was going on to his rear, though he sat bolt upright in his saddle, and turned his head to neither the right hand or the left.

A little longer and he was all but clear of the herd. Then, just as Jack was raising his voice in a warning cry, his horse stumbled, staggered and fell. It was all the work of an instant, but it was very thoroughly done. The horse was down, and right in front of him, as he had been flung by the fall, lay Sanchez. Jack was ten yards to the right, and the leaders of the herd were as many yards in his rear.

"Touch and go!" shouted Jack. "Lie still and I think I can bring you through the ripple."

And then, obliquing his horse, Jack began a lively fusillade. He did not care to kill so much as to bring down, and he showed what he could do at snap-shot shooting in close quarters. Two of the steers stumbled forward, and fell right over the horse that was struggling in a vain effort to rise to its feet, crushing it once more to the earth. A little wall of flesh, living and dead, rose in front of Sanchez.

It was the best that Jack could do. There was no time to attempt the maneuver by which he had saved Morgiana; nor was there room in which to execute it. Now he had to look out for himself.

But, as long as he kept his eyes open he knew that he was in no danger, and he wheeled carelessly, firing as he went. When Sanchez rose behind his barricade, and commenced to shoot into the faces of the nearest cattle, the work was about over. The front parted around the barrier; and those in the rear who could be affected by the movement, followed to the right. A few hundred passed to the left; but Atherton was content to let them go. He was getting in

his work further back; and it was with a feeling of triumph that he saw Sanchez coolly helping up his struggling mustang, which, after all, had not been badly harmed.

"A regular burster of a fall he had, and I thought when those steers went over him that he would be done for," said Jack, gayly, as he ranged alongside of the Silent One.

"But he's tough as whalebone, and don't look the worse for wear. Hustle up, and we'll finish rounding up the herd. If we had the whips we could do the work in no time; but I guess we are able for it, anyhow, if you will put your heart into it.

Sanchez was as silent as usual. He looked toward Jack as though uncertain whether he saw him, and then nodded. Without a word he was in the saddle; and the two, as if by mutual consent, headed their horses toward the cattle.

CHAPTER VI.

SAVED BY THE SABER.

"You don't know what started the brutes?" yelled Jack, as the two drove along, side by side, saving themselves somewhat for the struggle that was to come.

Sanchez shook his head, and then rose in his stirrups, looking to the rear as if to get a glimpse of the cause.

"If they started of themselves the rush may play out; if they are driven, it might be as well to begin at the other end. The females are out of the way; and if we took off the pressure the brutes would stop. Those in the front are beginning to look back now."

For answer, Sanchez—who evidently heard, though he did not appear to be listening—pointed ahead.

"Right you are! The reds have a hand in it, sure as you live. That gang is waiting for the plums to fall into their mouths; and there is another behind shaking the tree. Guess we better go for blood and hair; and leave the cattle to take care of themselves. Got your irons full, and in working order?"

Again Sanchez nodded. The two had recharged their weapons with equal celerity, and were ready for business.

"Then we had better give the ladies a hint to start for the house, while we look after covering the retreat. The copper-skins may be only after cattle; but I never knew the day they wouldn't scoop in a few prisoners if they came handy. And, by the way, there ought to be a man around somewhere. I suppose I will have to look after the judge if the girl is to have any peace of mind. It looked as though he was going to clear the ruck; but he is crazy enough to stop right in the road. No! there he is now. Stands like a statue, and if he's not getting out his fiddle, I am a lunatic who sees double, and then don't get things straight."

Sure enough, standing just a little beyond the track of the rushing herd, the judge was vacantly watching it go by; and if there was anything to be told from his attitude he was more abstracted than ever, and neither realized the danger from which he had escaped, or thought of the absence of his daughter.

"He's safe enough unless the drove turns," thought Gilt-Edge Johnny; "and if it does he will have to take care of himself for the present. When we get the business in hand well over I'll try to look him up. He is too crazy to hurt himself; and there isn't an Indian living that would run the chances and lift his hair."

The two had been keeping well up with the herd, and Eleena and her young charge were already far behind; but Johnny, turning in his saddle, could make out their figures, as they stood gazing to the front from the same spot at which the sport had left them.

The distance was too great to make his voice heard by them, but he thought perhaps they might understand his signs. He raised his hands, pointed to the front and the rear where the danger lay; and then made a motion that he hoped would tell them to make good their retreat. Perhaps they could see the warriors who were skurrying across the plain; but if not, they ought to understand that there was something there for them to avoid.

There was no time for anything more if Jack and the Silent One intended to overtake the head of the flying herd, and block any game that the warriors might have in view. Of course, the odds were so terribly against them that the effort looked like madness; but John Atherton was not called Gilt-Edge for nothing, and he had his own ideas of what constituted odds. On horseback he felt able to take care of a dozen warriors; and thought it possible that Sanchez—for whom, and his silent courage, he began to feel a great respect—could take care of the other two or three.

He only waited to see that Eleena gave a hasty glance in each of the directions indicated, and then, having assisted Morgiana to reach the back of her mustang, mounted herself, and turned slowly away.

The advance guard of the cattle, which had been slightly deflected from its course by the efforts of Eleena, was now far ahead of the main herd; and these the Indians were attempting to turn at right angles.

There was a small valley thereabouts, which offered a convenient course, and if they could be driven up this they would be able to give their attention to the rest by the time they reached the turning-point.

Of course they had seen something of what had been going on; but to all appearance the efforts that were being made were altogether directed to the rescue of the human beings who were in the line of danger. And with a knowledge that there were only two or three men there, who were on the spot by accident, and that the guardians of the herd were fully occupied in the rear, the Indians were not at all concerned about any hindrance, or danger to themselves.

"You understand that if we are to take them by anything like surprise, we have got to get ahead of the herd. Let out a link or two, or we may as well pull rein and go home. Can you do it?"

Sanchez moved his head up and down slightly. It could scarcely be said that he nodded, but Jack understood that the answer was an affirmative one.

"Then, do it, if you want to get there in anything like fine shape. I had an idea that your mustang had not extended himself; and now I want to see him go."

"He will be there first," answered Sanchez, turning so that Jack could catch the wicked gleam in his eyes.

"You think? A hundred dollars that your pluck is better than your judgment!"

"Taken!" was the only answer, and then the race began.

Atherton had so far been going into this affair as though it was a frolic; but now that there was money on the result, it became a matter of business, and he settled himself seriously to his work, like a man who was bound to win, but was not as absolutely certain of the result as he would like to be. The fact that it was as likely as not that the man who won would never have a chance to ask the other for the stakes, never troubled him in the least. When he fell upon the Indians he intended to trust to his head and hands to guard his life, and if luck had not altogether deserted him, he was not afraid that either would fail to do the best of service in the good cause.

The start was a fair one. While Jack slackened his speed, to make his motions for the benefit of Eleena, Sanchez held a tight rein on his mustang, which had by this time become possessed with the desire to go. While Johnny was talking he kept side by side with him, and not far away.

But when the word "taken" had been uttered, he simply gave his horse the rein, and trusted him to his own devices. He used neither voice, whip nor spur, sitting as erect, and his face as inscrutable as ever.

"With a feather-weight up he has the best chance, but the riding may make the difference—provided he keeps on after that same careless style. Perhaps he will wake up for the finish, and if he does, I'm not so sure that my hundred is not gone. When a fellow wants to keep one eye on the red-skins, and the other on this silent man, he hasn't much chance to do good work at home."

It did not seem to be the fair thing to make any outward manifestation of interest, and Jack was as quiet as his opponent; but for all that his hand was on the rein, feeling of his horse's mouth, and holding him straight. Side by side, neck and neck, crouching low as they sprang, the racers darted onward toward the goal that to some men would have begun to seem uncomfortably near.

The Indians had shown themselves to be experts at the cattle trade. Without much trouble they had headed the leaders into the valley, up which they followed for a short distance, until certain that they were inclosed within its jaws. Then, leaving a couple of their number to push them forward, the main body of the braves turned back. And that movement brought them face to face with not only the herd, but with the two silent riders, who were the nearer by some little distance. The attacks on the cattle had caused them to veer far to the right, and if left to themselves it was by no means certain that they would not follow the leading squad up the smaller valley.

Were these two mad riders attempting to obtain a position from which they could turn the stampede; or were they flying in terror from the danger that looked to be close behind? That was the question asked by each of the dozen braves as the pair, instead of slackening their speed at sight of what must be an unwelcome intruder, actually increased the rate at which they were going, one of them shouting:

"Is it first blood, or the coup stroke, that settles the hundred?"

"Blood," grimly answered the other, his hands filling with revolvers after an easy fashion that Jack himself might have envied.

"Blood it is!" answered Jack; and together their right hands were raised, just as a dozen shots came from the Indians in their front.

Neither man flinched as the bullets and arrows went hurtling by. Neither was harmed, and each was deadly cool as he pulled his trigger.

"Dead heat! Two men down! Close up for the coup!"

For the first time Gilt-Edge Johnny clapped his heels to the sides of his horse, and uttered a yell that might have been a war-cry, or simply an encouragement for the animal, though in either case the result was a burst of speed that brought him a half length to the front. There was no reason why he should not encourage his horse if he wanted to, in spite of the silence with which the race had so far been conducted, though he would not have done it but for the advantage which he saw Sanchez would have over him in trying for the coup.

In Indian warfare the scalp belongs to the one who first touches the body; and it was this "coup" that Jack had proposed as the test of who should have the two hundred dollars.

Sanchez, like many another Mexican Don, carried a sword at his hip; and he drew it at the last minute, with a coolness that assured Atherton he intended to use it.

"His reach is too long for me," muttered Jack.

"If I am going to use my knife I will have to get there a little ahead. Confound it! A Mexican will always have a way to beat you on your own offer if you don't look sharp for him. These fellows shoot quick; and they might get a little closer if they would practice awhile. Better hustle for it—and here you have it."

If the two expected that there would be any yielding before their furious charge they were much mistaken. The ten gathered themselves together, as two left-handed shots came into their ranks; and fired again at such short range that it seemed impossible they could miss. Then, the crash came.

Sanchez swung his saber around and downward; and Jack shot over the head of his stumbling horse, and striking as he fell the two again touched their men together.

But there were still six to two, and one of the latter was dismounted. It was the saber that saved Jack, as he lost a moment in drawing a revolver to replace the one that dropped from his left hand when he fell.

CHAPTER VII.

A CORDIAL WELCOME.

"RECKON we won't need a referee," said Jack airily, when the smoke of battle had cleared away, a moment later, and he took a last, long-range shot at the two flying foes, who were making their way at a headlong rate up the valley, in the direction the leaders of the herd had taken.

"Consider that you have won in three heats, close pressed. And as sure as you live, the little squabble has turned the stampede! You can cash in your chips as soon as there is time to attend to the business; but it strikes me that if we take a canter back we will stumble across a trifle more of fun—unless the *vagueros* have got in their work after a better shape than they are in the habit of doing. This has been play; but I wouldn't wonder if there had been a chance for real hard work at the other end. Unless the ladies have taken good advice, and retreated to the hacienda, it may be that you had better see after them, however. I didn't think of that. When I get my hand in I never know when to stop. And I would like the chance to get even. You saved my life there while I was fumbling around after the other revolver. I can draw a gun as quickly as anybody; but for an instant I half thought that I was going to be left."

"The indebtedness is still on my side," said Sanchez, bowing gracefully, and showing that he could talk as suavely as any one when he had the mind to.

"But for thy aid I would have been dead twice over—to say nothing of the service thou didst to Eleena. Let the cattle take care of themselves, and we will return to the hacienda. This swoop is a strange thing, since the Indians have feared this ranch for years, and this is the first attack on it or its herds since Eleena has been to the front. It may be that they have been even bolder than we have seen. Look! Seest thou anything that looks like smoke in the distance?"

"No smoke, that I can see. There is a cloud over the mountains, but it don't come from the hacienda; and there is little danger that the copper-skins have been monkeying around. They don't like walls when the cattle are plenty, and it is safe taking them. If you will look after the ladies I'll see if I can find pieces of the judge. He skipped out of the way as the cattle came down the valley; but I am afraid they will pick him up as they go back."

If there had been an auditor it might have amused him to listen to the two men; for the one spoke in pure Spanish, while Jack, seeing that it was understood, stuck to his native tongue. Perhaps Sanchez thought that he had spoken too much already, for he made no answer, and showed no interest in the fate of the man whom he had doubtless seen in the track of the herd. He simply doffed his sombrero, made a profound bow, and turned leisurely away, leaving Atherton to his own devices.

"Takes it cool enough. Let him go, though. I suppose I must look after the old fellow; and if I don't find him, I don't know whether I care

to go back to Morgiana. She will have a friend in the lady of the ranch that will suit her case better than a good-for-nothing like Gilt-Edge Johnny."

The few cattle that had been turned up the valley were only a dot on the surface of the main herd; and so long as there was a human being in danger, or possibly dead, it was not worth while to worry about them.

Jack cantered along, keeping a sharp lookout. For a time there was confusion worse confounded among the cattle. Many were down; some were straggling this way and that; and Jack could not at once locate the spot at which he had last seen the judge. He rather suspected that he lay somewhere about the middle of the broad, dark splotch on the plain, and that the last semblance of humanity had been trampled out of his shapeless form.

Then, to one side of the rout, he caught a glimpse of a speck, that resolved itself, as he came nearer, into Janvrin. He had seated himself on a dead steer, and was drawing the bow across the strings of his violin after the same absent fashion that Jack had noted the night before. Death had been within a few feet of him, but he had not noticed it. His daughter might be dead for all that he could know, and he had never missed her. It was a relief to see that the man still lived; and yet, the sport was not so certain that it was for the best. It was easy to see who was the protector, as between him and Morgiana. Without him, the girl would have a better chance to pass through life in safety.

It was with more sternness in his features than those who knew him best would have thought possible to see there, that Gilt-Edge Johnny rode up to the judge.

"Man alive! Have you no wits at all? Where is your daughter?"

Janvrin looked up as though startled and somewhat dazed by the unexpected address.

"Daughter! daughter!" he repeated, thoughtfully. "I have no daughter. Little Morgiana died ages ago, before Ursula came into my life to curse it. I am a fugitive and an outcast, trusting no man, with however fair a face he may come to me. You would betray me yourself if you could only remember. But you cannot. That was before your time, and I will never tell. We will fool them yet—Morgiana and I. No halter for me; and the music will drive away the evil spirit that is urging me to—ruin. You don't think an evil spirit could have power over me if I met it with this in my hands? Listen! Those chords ought to work the charm that will drive it out."

He was about to go back to his violin, but Jack had no time to waste, but answered him harshly:

"If the rope don't get you it will not be because you do not deserve it. Quit that nonsense and follow me. You don't deserve to have such a daughter; but I suppose she will go wild if I don't take you to her, to say nothing of the danger you run of losing your hair if you sit there much longer. Between the reds and the routing cattle any man with a trifle more sense would have gone under long ago. Providence protects fools—and it strikes me that it is very often at the expense of better persons. Come along, now; or blessed if I don't carry you."

To his surprise the harshly uttered words had an immediate effect, though they worked in a way he had not expected. The judge rose to his feet, and looked around as one awakening from sleep will do, when in a strange place.

"Where am I? How is this? What has become of Morgiana? If you know anything of her take me to her at once. What jugglery is this? A moment ago I was talking to you, but it was in the mountains, and it was night."

"Coming to yourself are you? Good! I am glad to see it; and I wouldn't advise you to let your wits go wool-gathering again till you get out of this country. Your daughter is safe—no thanks to you. I will take you to her, and if I am not mistaken she will have one night of comfort. If she was wise she would put you in a lunatic asylum until you learned how to behave yourself. It is murder, pure and simple to bring her into this country, for you won't find friends to help you out every day, and there will be precious few days that you won't need them. Now, say nothing more. You make me tired."

"I will say nothing more, and I will follow you. Morgiana can explain. I know that at times my mind wanders, but she can bring me back to myself—she, and the violin. Lead on."

It was as yet by no means certain that they could rejoin Morgiana without incurring some risk; or that that young lady was as safe as Jack had pronounced her, but the latter wasted no further time in explanation. He suffered his horse to amble along; and the judge, with a long, tireless stride, kept pace with him as he followed in the wake of Sanchez, whose mustang, showing no signs of the hard work he had done, was bearing him rapidly in the direction of the valley in which lay the hacienda. The herd was already far on its returning way; and beyond it could be seen the moving forms of horsemen, though whether they were the herdsmen of the ranch, or the Indians who had caused the stam-

pede, was more than the sport either knew or cared. He had done all that he had promised to do, and now was giving his attention to the man beside him. He had talked half-jestingly of exploring the mystery which he believed lay around the hacienda—and here was his chance. He would find Morgiana there; and could see more of Donna Eleena, and Sanchez, the Silent One. Besides, it was necessary that he should count out the hundred dollars he had lost.

In cold blood, and incumbered by the footman, it took Jack some time to come in sight of the hacienda. When he did, he could also see that a little troop of riders was coming out to meet him, and that at its head rode Eleena, with the Silent One at her elbow. After that it was not long until they met.

"You have found him?" Eleena exclaimed, as they came within speaking distance.

"The girl was wild over the loss of her father; and would have come out to search for him, prostrated as she was, had I not promised to go myself, and actually used force to prevent her. You have finished up your work well, and you shall find that we are not ungrateful. Here is a mount for the gentleman, and we must fly to ease the mind of his daughter."

"Glad that I can leave them in such good hands; and if I have been of any service no doubt I will find that virtue is its own reward. If I can be of any further service in the matter of the herd, command me. Otherwise I must be going."

"Going—but toward the ranch. For this night at least you sleep under my roof. My men will look after the cattle; and as they have already beaten off the raiders there will be no need for thee and thy ready pistols to aid them. But back thou goest, both as my escort and my honored guest."

Like Sanchez, Eleena seemed to have English at her command as though it was her native tongue; but, in her excitement, she skipped from the one language to the other, instinctively conscious that Jack could follow her in either.

Bashfulness was no trait in the character of the Gilt-Edge sport; and as he knew that his pard would wait for him if he came to the trysting spot before his return, he had no hesitation about accepting the invitation, though he did look about him before he spoke.

He found that Janvrin had climbed into the saddle; and that the most of the Donna's retainers had already headed at a gallop toward the herd. For him there was no longer any work on the plain; and the mystery of the hacienda seemed almost within his grasp. He turned again to Eleena with his most winning smile. It is true that he suspected that she was the woman whom he had watched as she stood at the secret burial of an unknown female; but then—he had just helped her save a life, and she was rich and beautiful, besides being apparently grateful.

"For this night, then," he answered; and without delay he found himself riding by the side of the lady of the ranch, while close behind followed Judge Janvrin and Sanchez—the one as silent as the other, but both watching keenly the two in the lead.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WARNING.

WHEN the little party drew near to the buildings, Morgiana came running to meet her father. She had doffed her boy's costume and assumed a dress belonging to Eleena, so that at first sight Jack scarcely recognized her; and it took a second to understand what a beautiful girl the change had made her.

The judge stared at her abstractedly, and the movement he made in holding out his hand seemed to be mechanically done.

Morgiana did not notice that, however. She threw her arms around his neck, kissed him repeatedly, and laughed and cried by turns, as she finally walked by his side with her arm over his shoulder.

At the door Jack fell back to allow her to precede him, and the movement called attention to himself. Morgiana turned from her father, and caught his hand in hers.

"I have not thanked you, yet. Twice you have saved our lives, and each time at risk of your own. Heaven bless you! May it be kind to you as you have been kind to us."

She bent closer as she spoke, so that her lips were almost touching his cheek—but it was no chaste salute of gratitude that she intended. Into his ear she cast a thrilling whisper.

"You are in danger, here, of your life. Be on your guard, for they will try to slay thee. I know not why, nor who; but some band will strike at thy life, and the blow will fall tonight. I heard but a few words; yet heed my warning."

She ran on after her father, who had stepped over the threshold, side by side with Eleena. Her face was flushed, as though from maiden confusion over her too openly expressed gratitude, and looking her in the face no one could have suspected from anything there to be seen what was the thrilling nature of the warning she had cast into the ear of Gilt-Edge Johnny.

His face was fully as inscrutable. He glanced after her with a faint smile on his lip, and the

suspicion of a twinkle in his eye. And, to tell the truth, his aspect was in fair keeping with his thoughts, even though he did not for a moment doubt the good faith of the warning.

"What a little actress she is?" he was thinking.

"She has not watched over a madman all these years for nothing. There is no doubt some sober truth in what she told me; though how did she get onto it? Most likely she heard something that passed between the fair Donna and her cavalier; though what they could want to slaughter me for, after I had been getting in such a fine bit of work on their behalf, is strange enough. Though, by Jove! there is an explanation. They may have an interest in that self-same mine from which the Daisy and I tumbled so unceremoniously. It would have been hard to catch a weasel asleep, anyhow; now, if they can take me in, after any ordinary fashion, I deserve to sleep my last sleep with the unrighteous."

And yet, with such thoughts in his mind, he was as genial, and as smiling as ever, when Eleena, halting within the doorway, held out both her hands to him, and exclaimed:

"Welcome to the Ranch of the Golden Dream! No man ever before crossed its threshold to whom its owner owed so much, and it will be a hard thing if she find not some way to repay her debts."

"Not another word. To a roving, careless waif like myself such things come as a matter of course, and when they are over they are forgotten. Fate put you in what may have seemed to you to be danger; and chance threw me in the way to be of what looked like assistance. Blame fate, or bless chance; but spare my blushes. I deserve no credit for doing the things that come to me like second nature. Perhaps your thanks are more due to this gentleman and his daughter than you would suppose. If I had not been watching them it is doubtful if I would have troubled myself about your cattle, or noticed when the Don was being put to his trumps to hold his own. Actually, I came to help them; and the rest was incidental."

Still, thou hast saved two lives, if not three; and headed back the cattle which, without thee, would have been lost; to say nothing of the fact that you made such slaughter among the savages that it will be a long time before they risk a raid again. They were none of our neighbors, by the way; but from some other province; and they will go back to tell their tribe that the Golden Dream is guarded by demons indeed."

"Guarded by demons, eh?" asked Janvrin, after his abstracted way.

"Ha, ha! probably you do not understand—how should you? Years ago the Indians were bolder than they are now; and it was almost impossible to live in isolated locations on their account. They came against this ranch as they had done against others; but they met, on more than one occasion, so fierce a resistance, and were so regularly driven back with great loss, that they finally avoided it altogether, saying that it was guarded by demons, and that it was useless to try to take it. Perhaps they thought the spell was broken because the ranch had fallen under the management of a woman; but this trial ought to convince them that she can hold her own."

"And in their legends I suppose I will henceforth figure as one of the principal demons. Don't know that I would blame them. Between the Don and myself the slaughter has not been small; and if it had not been for looking after the ladies it is a little doubtful if any of them at our end would have got away."

"It is as well that one or two escaped to tell the story. The truth will be even more wholesome in its effects than any explanation of the imagination. But make thyself at home for a little, while I look after the household. It is late in the day, and there will soon be a dinner ready. Thou hast earned the right to be both hungry and tired. I will be back instantly."

"Guarded by demons, eh?" repeated Janvrin, as she left the room.

"If this spot be strangely familiar, then, what wonder if it is so? They would never think to find me here. If the music fails me not, then perhaps, for a time, I am safe at last."

"Nothing like music to keep off the witches and the hobgoblins," said Jack, encouragingly, as he noted that the eyes of the judge were fixed upon him.

"I sometimes feel it necessary to indulge in it myself when the spell is on me; and I never knew it to fail. But did you ever try the experiment of having some one else play for you? Your daughter, for instance, might be able to help you if she has any bent in that direction."

"Not she. She hates the sounds of it. But you—what do you play? The violin?"

"Sometimes—but not like you do. I wouldn't like to be heard after you have been drawing the bow over the strings. I am not very particular when it comes to a question of my own amusement or profit. One thing is about the same as another; I am an equal botch at them all. I see there is a piano here. Suppose we

join our forces; and you pay some attention to what you are playing. You might get a heap of solid enjoyment out of your labors; and I don't believe that you hear the first note. Pin yourself down to it, old man, and don't let go for death or demons. If you got hold of your will-power again I guess you wouldn't worry about the rest of the world, or have much trouble in regard to your own."

"You are no botch at anything," retorted the judge, whose expression had again changed, and who was looking at Jack in his sanest way.

"If you undertook to play the violin you would do it well—as you do everything else. If you touched the piano it would be with a skill that was above mediocrity. Let us see if I am not telling the truth."

Jack laughed, but made no objection, dropping on the stool at the piano, and running his fingers over the keys in a way that went far to convince the judge that he had made no mistake.

"It has been some years since I got sufficiently near to civilization to have a chance at this, and guess I am out of practice, as the ladies say; but name what you intend to try, or if I do not know it give me your keys, and I will see how it goes."

Of course Jack had his reasons for this. He wanted to learn more of the man and his nature, and at the same time, perhaps, do him a benefit. Half an hour passed, and in that time they were beginning to get acquainted. They played snatches of this and that, after a fashion the hacienda had never heard equaled; and Donna Eleena stood in the doorway for fully fifteen minutes, unwilling to break in upon the seance, for her own sake as well as for theirs.

When she spoke at last, and broke the spell, it was because she thought she could wait no longer. After congratulations that were indeed no vain flattery she preceded her guests to the dining-room.

"If the warning of Morgiana be worth anything, and the senorita has thoughts of death and murder, she certainly carries it off pretty well. Is it to come at the table; or is it to be later on, in the silent watches of the night? I would sooner suspect that long-visaged Sanchez; though common gratitude ought to give me at least a breathing-spell. We were pards this afternoon; it is hard to think that we may be deadly foes to-night."

In some such way ran the suspicions of Gilt-Edge Jack; but he moved as cheerfully to the banquet as though it was of his own giving, and his guests were near and dear.

But he was hungry; and he was thirsty. He had not broken fast since morning, and the tempting display before him was almost enough to silence suspicion. He ate, and he drank; and after a little was telling to the hostess as much as he chose in regard to the reason of his appearance, so opportunely made that day.

In brief, his story ran something like this.

He and his pard—better known as "the Daisy"—had been prospecting, and had struck a mine. It had been worked somewhere in the dark ages; but evidently not in the memory of the present generation. They were developing things at a great rate; and were just arranging for one of them to go back for supplies, and a reinforcement of a few good men, when they were cleaned out so quickly that they did not know who had a hand in it. The attacking party meant business, and they were compelled to separate, agreeing to meet in this valley.

"And who is this partner of yours—this Daisy as you call him? What is his name?"

"The Daisy it is, as far as I know. If he has any other name I never thought to ask him for it."

"But if he is like yourself I should not have thought that you would have given up without a fight. Two such men could do wonders."

"But we know enough not to bet on a full hand when we are certain the other party holds four of a kind and won't take a bluff. The medicine was dead against us, and so we evacuated. Red-skins are fair game, and we can defeat them with great slaughter, without much reference to the odds; but when it comes to killing off Dons and Senors, with state and church behind them, and all the advantages of position and numbers to start with, you will find that the Daisy and I have a few grains of common sense scattered through the general debris of our disposition. We knew when it was time to go, and left accordingly; and we didn't want to imbitter hostilities by dropping any corpses around to mark the way of our going."

His story, such as it was, interested his hostess. His manner was, if anything, more entertaining still. She had never met such a man before, though she had been maid, wife, and widow, and had seen something of the world that lay beyond the valley. He was a study in muscle and mind, and one that she found very entertaining, though at times there was a nervousness about her manner that she was not altogether able to conceal, carefully though she might try.

And Jack rattled on, doing his best to entertain his host, though now and then turning to Morgiana and her father, who had not been suffered entirely to drop out of the conversa-

tion. The absence of Sanchez was something of a surprise, but Atberton asked no questions; and he was actually enjoying himself, even when his sharp eyes noted something that looked like jugglery about the cup into which his hostess poured coffee for him with her own fair hands.

"If it is to come at the dinner it is here now," he thought. "Guess I will know how to surround it; but I wish I knew whether it is to act at once, or give me time to reach my room, to which I suppose I will be escorted by the major domo. I'll take the latter for choice, and run the chances."

If Donna Eleena looked into that cup after her guest had left the table she would have seen nothing there but a trace of some sediments of a grayish white color; and she would have had to look at the handkerchief in Jack's bosom to learn where the rest of the contents had gone.

An hour later Eleena came quietly along the passage, and touched lightly the door of the room in which Atherton had been placed not very long before. The knock was slight, and there was no response from within.

She hesitated, and then knocked again.

"One must take the risk," she muttered; "and if I find him awake, there will be no trouble to frame an excuse. It is better this way, at all events."

Then she pressed a knob that was hidden in the casing, and the door softly opened.

The only light within was from the moon. It streamed in through the window, the curtain of which had been thrust aside, and revealed a dark, huddled heap on the floor.

Closing the door carefully behind her, Eleena lit a match, and bent over what she knew was the prostrate form of a man.

It was Gilt-Edge Jack. He lay as though his limbs had suddenly failed him, just after entering the room; and the drawn revolver in his hand, the barrel of which lay along the floor, and pointing toward Eleena, seemed to indicate that he had suspected treachery, and had made at least one instinctive effort to combat it.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SECRETS OF THE VAULTS.

"He fought against the drug longer than I thought was possible," muttered the Donna, as she looked carefully at the face of the sport.

"I was only afraid that he would drop off before I could get the other two away. Not much music about him now. It seems a pity; and yet, there is no better way. I am not sure that the task is one that I care to accomplish; but I cannot falter now."

If Jack was shamming now he was certainly doing it most successfully. Without knowing anything about what it was that he was supposed to have taken, or what its effects should be, he seemed to have made a clever guess at what was expected, since not a shade of suspicion entered the mind of the woman that things might not be as they seemed. She threw away the match, that had burned down to her very fingers, and then, stooping, raised him from the floor with less of an effort than one would have thought possible.

The body was as rigid as though death had been there for an hour, and the fingers of the sport still clasped the butt of the revolver. Had they stiffened there it would have been none the more difficult to draw the weapon from their hold.

But Eleena paid no attention to the weapon, which perhaps she did not notice. Without hesitation or delay she passed through the door, which yielded to a slight push, and stalked down the hallway, cautiously bearing her load so that his head was upright, and his heels did not touch the floor. If she had known that the seemingly dead man was as wide awake as she was, that he admired the strength of the arms of steel that she locked about him, and felt with a tingle the effort of her pliant frame, it is more than likely that she would have dropped him in affright, and fled without delay.

But Jack kept his secret to himself, strange though the adventure might be; and though he was disappointed at being kept in utter darkness, he never changed his mind, or dreamed of calling a halt. He was determined to know what was meant to be in store for him; and to find out more of the mysteries of the hacienda.

So long as they were in the hall of the building, where they were in at least some danger of being met, Eleena proceeded with caution; and ready at any moment to drop her burden and take whatever course would appear the best. But after a little she left the hall, and began the descent of a stairway, which was reached by a secret door. After that she stepped more swiftly, and without fear.

The air grew damp and cold; and though he could hear no footfall Jack imagined that his bearer was stepping on a stone floor. Should he slip from her grasp, and demand an explanation?

He asked himself the question; and the answer was, no. As yet there was nothing to show what she had in view; and any explanation he could wring from her would be more false than the hospitality she had thrust upon him; to say

nothing of the danger of her escaping him in the darkness. Sooner or later she would want a light, and then—

As he was thinking what he would do then it seemed to him that he heard a far-away noise. At the instant he dropped from the arms that gave no previous warning; and heard a slight click behind him, like the snap of a spring. He knew without a doubt that he was alone in a dungeon beneath the hacienda.

"This beats a chicken controversy!" was his mental ejaculation, as he felt around him, and noted that he had been most unceremoniously dropped on a rude pallet.

"Didn't want to break any bones so she puts the corpse on a mattress, and leaves it there to molder. Truly the tender mercies of the fair sex are cruel. There is nothing like sticking to a scheme; but it strikes me that if she is gone for good, and I don't succeed in finding the spring to that door, I am in a pretty bad box, and pard will wait for some time at that pine tree as aforesaid."

Although it was possible that the Donna might return at any moment, with some of her ministers, Jack did not intend to lie there in the darkness and wait for that event to take place. He cautiously raised himself from the couch, and felt his way toward the door through which his fair jailer had vanished. He was certain that there was a door; and he was pretty sure that he knew where it was.

When he reached the wall he lit a match. He had too few of them to waste any while groping about in the middle of the floor.

The door was there; and to his delight he found that there was no secret about the spring, from the inside at least. The room seemed to be a secret retreat rather than a prison cell; and though it was uncomfortable enough it was no doubt built with an eye to use in certain emergencies.

"That settles it. She thinks there is no danger of my waking up, and I guess she believes that I am dead. If I can get out of this what an elegant opportunity there will be for me to play ghost. I would give a hundred for a lantern now, so that I could explore around among the vaults a little. They have a story to tell, as I thought; and in one way or another I will get at the bottom of it yet."

With such thoughts in his mind it was pretty certain that Jack was not very greatly alarmed over his position. He was always cool in the presence of danger; and to-night he was an iceberg.

Although it looked as though he would be left there for an indefinite period of time, he did not care to run too many risks until the intentions of Eleena had time to develop. She might return before long, and he did not intend that she should find him anywhere but on the spot where she had left him. He stood in the doorway and listened. Although she had been in her bare feet, or else so lightly shod that her footfalls were thoroughly muffled, he thought that he could hear the soft dropping of her feet if she approached him while he listened in the darkness. Instead of that there came to his ears the unmistakable sound of a groan. He was not alone in the vaults; and perhaps whoever was near was in a worse plight than himself.

The noise was not repeated, but he was inclined to think that the person who uttered it was not far away. It was worth following up.

By the light of his match he had seen that there was a narrow passageway and he had no doubt that a door to the cell of this other prisoner could be found. Leaving the door of his own cell open he slipped along the corridor, knocking as he went. Before he had gone a dozen feet he found that of which he was in search. Some one, in a strangely muffled tone, asked who he was, and what he wanted.

"Guess I'm in the same boat with yourself. What are you doing in there?"

"I am a prisoner," came the answer.

"If you can do it, for heaven's sake give me a light. I die in this darkness."

"Sorry I can't help you on that line, but light is more precious than money just now. The only shape I have it in is matches, and I can't afford to waste many of them. Is there nothing else I can do for you?"

"You can try to help me out of this place. There will be little trouble about it. If you look you will find a bolt and a spring. Were I on the outside I could find them in a moment, even in the darkness."

"Then you know something about this place?"

"Too much, too much. It is that which has brought me here now. My knowledge began to be dangerous. I am thrust away here, to die. If you do not help me I am a lost man."

"What might your name be, then? If I hear of any man being lost it will be as well that I should be able to say that I know what has become of him."

"Jest not about it. My name is Guido, and I am he who was supposed to be deaf and dumb. Perhaps she suspected the truth at last, and thought that there was danger if I was allowed to live. Help me out, I pray."

"I am not so sure that I will. By your own showing, Guido, your own showing, you have been pretty much of a rascal, and letting out

will not be likely to improve you. I will have to have a cleaner breast than that before I move a finger. I may be mistaken; but I suspect that you are the rascal who assisted to bury a corpse up on the hills, near the big pine that overlooks the broad valley."

Guido was abject in his abasement. The darkness had broken his spirit; and he was revengeful besides. He meant to tell the truth if he died for it.

"I am that unhappy wretch. It is because I know too much of what has been going on that I am here. When it was done, and she had no more need of me and my shovel, she brought me hither; and I have been alone in the darkness ever since. My tongue is parched with thirst, and I have not tasted food since then; but it is the light that I want most of all. Give me that and you may leave me here. I would sooner die in the light than live in the darkness."

"And what was the reason of that secret burial? There was some crime to hide, and you were assisting to cover it up. How, then, can I trust you?"

"I know not what the crime may have been. I saw only the dead body; and did as I was told. If I had hesitated, she would have found some one else to bury us both. But I could guess; oh, I could guess!"

"Guess ahead, then; and if your guesses seem to be worth anything, I don't know but what I will try to help you out of this fix. And a very nasty one it is, my friend."

"Ah, you have never heard the story of the Ranch Accursed. I might have known that, for you are no Mexican, well as you speak the language. It was a woman that we buried, only a poor peon girl, but if thou hadst looked at her neck, I doubt not that thou wouldst have found there the marks of the vampire. Perhaps she bit deeper than she meant, for it is not often that she slays."

"Come, Guido, you are progressing. This begins to sound interesting. Several times you have spoken of 'she.' Who is she, and what is the matter with her? Many thanks for the compliments to my Spanish, but they will hardly throw me off of the quest. If it will do you any good, you can continue the conversation in good, square English. Badly as you speak your native tongue, I suspect you can handle others."

"Thou art right, senor. Badly as I handle my native tongue, I know others. But thou must remember that I am Guido, the dumb; and that but few near here have ever heard me speak at all. Thou hast asked who it was I meant by she. If I answer, I put my life in thy hands. Swear to me, then, that thou wilt never betray me. But few know the truth, though something of it is whispered from time to time among those who know the Ranch of the Golden Dream as it was of old."

"Consider me sworn, and then hurry up with the revelation. Perhaps we have not as much time to spend over it as you seem to think."

"But wilt thou not first try to open the door? If we were together, we would not need to speak so loud, and there would be less danger of being overheard."

"To say nothing of the chance for thee to slip away without telling anything at all. No, I will remain where I am until I learn what there is to tell; and then, if it seems to be the truth thou hast told, the door will be open fast enough. I see that I understand the secret of the spring."

"Then I tell it to thee in short; and after I am safely out of this, and by thy side, thou canst ask what questions it may please thee. If this is the bargain, I speak. Otherwise, go thy way. I may as well die with the secret in my breast as to be betrayed after I have told it."

"On that basis, fire away!"

Even yet Guido was slow to speak. If it had not been for his own desperate plight there is little doubt that he would have refused to tell the story at any price. But, though he knew not whether he could trust the man on the other side of the door, he was sure that he had been thrust into that dungeon to die; and he was willing to buy his release, or dole out his story for the sake even of companionship.

"But once in that passage and I can show thee the way to the upper air. I know it well; and the springs and bolts are all on the inside."

"That is all right. In no hurry am I to find the upper air, though it might be as well to learn the way. I am waiting here for 'she' to return."

"Then, listen," said Guido. "This is the story of the Ranch Accursed."

CHAPTER X.

THE RANCH ACCURSED.

"STRANGE thing it has seemed to be to those who knew not the truth; but the Ranch of the Golden Dream has always, or nearly always, been under the rule of a woman. How long ago it was built I know not; but it was a woman who laid the corner stone."

"She came hither, they say, direct from Spain, followed by a shrunk, sallow-faced man, whom she called her husband, though he had no mind of his own, and scarcely a name. They had between them a grant to many leagues of land,

that was fair enough to look on, even if it was covered by the fierce Indians who had made it their hunting-ground as far back as the memory of their tribes could run.

"A little after the hacienda had been completed the man died of a slow, wasting sickness; and though there was a Mission, and holy fathers within a few score of miles, no messenger was sent, and he died without the rites of the church."

"But Donna Ursola cared not. She had men to carry arms and do her bidding, and here she dwelt for years. On the plains she had cattle by the thousand; and in the mountains she knew of mines from which they took the yellow gold in such heaps as it had never been taken before. Her herdsmen had families, and the peons who worked in her mines settled near. Others came. There were settlements where all had been wilderness."

"The Indians made a fight for their hunting-grounds, but they were beaten back so rapidly that it seemed to them that it was done by magic. At a siege the hacienda in its strength of wall could laugh; and when they tried surprise they were met so promptly that it seemed as though some demon must have given warning and aid. They could not fight against the odds, and so, deserted the ground, or made peace with the proprietors. No savage who had been born within a hundred miles of the spot would undertake to lift his hand against the Ranch of the Golden Dream."

"But strange stories began to be told among the servitors, and the peons. Beautiful though she was, there was plenty of fear, and very little love for the Donna. When her husband died there were some who said that there were the marks of a vampire's teeth on his neck. And afterward, from time to time, there were strange and sudden deaths of fair young girls, whose graves were found, later on, and by chance, to be empty. The vampire knew how to slay; and also how to bring to life again. She had her prison cells at the hacienda; and was mistress of all strange drugs and witchcraft. When she had nourished her own wretched life with the cream of theirs, she slew them again, and outright, burying their bodies on the hillside, or anywhere so it was without the walls of the hacienda. A vampire, thou knowest, can not sleep by the side of the body of its victim."

"Didn't know anything about it," replied Jack, who was growing interested in this story, the sequel of which he thought that he could already partly guess. "It strikes me that you are not going to finish in such a hurry as you professed; and that you are getting along with your education quite finely. A college professor could not pick his words to better advantage. It's all right for me, because I am not going till I find out more of what is going on; but if you are in a hurry to get your dinner I will allow you to cut it a little shorter. Thou art still several hundred years back of the present date."

"But when one begins the story it grows on him, and he forgets hunger and thirst until it is told. Besides that, the story of two hundred years ago is the story of to-day. Ursola had a daughter, to whom came the Ranch of the Golden Dream. Like to her mother, she had a husband who died young, and ever after she remained single. In her time there were the same stories afloat that had been in the generation before. As thou carest not to hear the particulars I will try not to remember them. It is enough to know that from mother to daughter was the inheritance handed down; and though the daughters went abroad at times in the world, yet they came back to the ranch at last, and lived as their mothers had before them. It is in the blood; and the mother intrusts to the daughter the secrets of her poisons and her magic before she dies. It may be that she will live here a half-score of years before they come into play; but sooner or later there are the old stories afloat, and unconsecrated graves on the hillside—such as thou sawest but the other night."

"Ahem!" said the sport, rather staggered with the conclusion, though he could hardly have helped anticipating it.

"I thought she looked somewhat ravenous, yet it is a hard story to swallow. And so, the present mistress of the ranch is a vampire?"

"Truly; and the worst of the race. It has been my evil fortune to have been in some things her assistant, being chosen because it was reported to her that I was dumb."

"If thou art dumb Heaven preserve us from a man with a tongue. As I have had the door partly open for the last half-hour, and thou hast no doubt told all the falsehoods that a mind of some invention and little conscience could concoct on such short notice, I guess you may as well come forth. I would caution you that there is a cocked revolver pointing directly toward you; and that at the first sign of foul play I let her go. If you can show me a way to the open air, well and good. I have no objection to having a way of escape in case the lady with the sharp teeth forgets me until exhausted nature can stand no more. And now, Guido, let me see what you look like. One of these days we will probably meet again; and if I find that there has been no basis for these legends it will be the worse for you."

"Heaven and the saints are my witnesses, senor, that it has been but the simple truth that I told thee, and that much more could I have added—including my own experience—that would have made thy blood run cold."

His tongue would no doubt have run on indefinitely had not Jack struck a match, and held it up so that the tiny flame shone full on his face. So quietly had the door swung on its hinges that Guido had no thought that there was nothing but the air between him and his unknown interviewer. He started back, though it was not with a view of hiding his features. After the first shock was over he stood quietly enough while Jack looked him over. As there was a revolver in close proximity to his breast his submissive spirit was not so much to be wondered at.

"I have you down fine, I guess; and I hope you have observed my own manly features. I don't want you to make any mistake about them. For helping you at this pinch I expect undying gratitude, and prompt recognition. If you think that you will remember me, and if you have nothing further of profit to add to the ghost story you have been telling, you may as well skip. I want the vault to myself."

"But one thing more; and that I tell thee because I would deal honestly by thee. Close at the heels of the Donna follows Sanchez, her confidant and adviser. Beware of the Silent One. He is the more dangerous of the two."

"I had guessed that much already, but, thanks for the warning. Now lead on to the outer world, and I will close the doors behind thee, so that the way of thy flight may remain a mystery."

"This way, then, and keep thy elbow always against the wall to the right. These passages were hewed out of the solid rocks before thee and I were born. We come at last to the side of the barranca, which they say opened to swallow the old witch, Ursola. If it had taken the hacienda along with her it would have been the better for thee and me, if I mistake not largely. There is a way up, that leadeth to one of the windows overlooking the gash; and there is a way down that I must follow. Go with me to the end of the passage and I show them to thee. It may be well to have the knowledge, some day; and serve to convince thee that Guido has told but the truth. Whether thou remainest or not is thy business, into which I intrude not, though it is not bad advice that tells thee there is danger for the stranger who stays within these walls, and that it would be better for him to leave while the way is yet open."

"Thanks! I will look at your paths, and keep them in mind, together with the explanation that thou wilt give me of how to leave that same barranca when I have got to the bottom of it. After that, go thy way, and see that no whisper of the things of which we have talked reaches the ears of a soul. Vampire or not, the Donna is a woman who can make friends; and I care not that she should know how I have heard of her history."

Guido seemed to be at home in the corridor, now that he was once out of the dungeon in which Jack had found him. He hastened along, with the sport at his heels, both keeping an elbow closely to the wall; and after passing several doors, which had been carefully bolted, they finally reached the one which opened out on the barranca.

Scant explanation was needed as to the path that led up and down, and the narrow road was lost to view within a few paces, looking in either direction, even though the moonlight was streaming straight into the opening.

"Best go with me," urged Guido. "I know not who thou art, but I have more than gratitude for thee in my heart, and I would be sorry if thou lost thy life, and missed the revenge—which I think is what thou art after. The passage was dark and strange, and I doubt if thou canst find the way back to the cell where we met."

"Don't rack your brain the least on my account; and as for finding my way back, there will be no trouble about that. I counted the steps. Farewell, and keep out of the way of the Donna and the Silent One until I see thee again."

"A queer customer he is," thought Jack, as he turned back, and felt his way along the passage in the darkness.

"Hardly to be wondered at, though. Twenty-four hours of this, with a prospect of an indefinite number more, is enough to unhinge any man. Am not certain but what it would even break me all up. I certainly feel easier at knowing that there is a back door entrance which can be made available in case I am left here longer than is convenient."

"Guess we are here at the place we started from. The air is a little damp, but I never was troubled with the rheumatics, and was always able to wake when there was danger around. Think I'll drop to sleep for a while, so as to be bright and ready for the Donna or her ministering angels, in case any of them put in an appearance."

He lit a match to make sure that he was in the same cell in which he had been placed; wished again that he had a lantern so that he could make some explorations; and then flung himself

down upon his pallet. Strange as it may seem, he was almost instantly asleep.

Since it was dark when Eleena dropped him there was no need to be at all careful of the position he assumed. Whether she returned with a light, or not, she could not tell whether he had moved since she left him. The only precaution he took was to have his revolver clutched in the same vise-like style of gripe as before, and with the muzzle pointing toward the door. He did not believe that he would need it, but it was as well to have the weapon ready.

CHAPTER XI.

A SINGLE DROP FROM A VIAL.

GILT-EDGE JOHNNY slept soundly; and, what was more, his slumbers were sweet. His lips were closely compressed, but his breathing was so gentle that not a sound could be heard, and from the time that he threw himself down not a movement was made to show that he was not a corpse indeed.

As long as he was able to do it, Jack had made the best use of his time that was possible. Lying awake in the darkness would not have been the most cheerful way of spending the hours, and would no doubt have gone far to unsteady even his magnificent nerve.

And more than one hour had elapsed before there was a light patter of feet on the stone floor without the cell.

Slight as was the sound it brought the sport to his senses at once. Without moving he looked toward the door, and could see a tiny thread of light creeping through the narrowest of cracks. Well as the work had been done the door could not shut out entirely the glow of the lantern carried by Eleena as she came down the corridor.

"The time is at hand to develop her intentions," thought Jack. "I hardly take much stock in the story of Guido, but there is something uncanny about the place, that makes one willing to believe almost anything in spite of himself. But, vampire or not, the Donna is certainly a remarkably beautiful woman, and I don't know that I would shrink from the interview if I knew that she came to devour."

The clicking of the spring broke in on the train of thought, and he mentally braced himself for the coming inspection.

Between his half open lids Atherton watched the Donna as she entered the cell, and stepped boldly toward his couch. The lantern which she carried in her hand she held high above her shoulder, so that while it threw its light over the quiet form upon the pallet it also illuminated her own face, which bore a somewhat troubled look, but showed no signs that she meditated anything desperate. Viewing it calmly it was hard to believe the wild story which Guido had told; and had it not been for the grave on the hillside Jack would have more than doubted.

A few feet away she halted, and narrowly inspected the face of the motionless man.

"The drug seems to work strangely on him; and if I had not been so guarded in its use I should think that he had swallowed more than I intended. How death-like he looks. Little need was there for me to worry lest he might come back to his senses and find himself lying here alone and a prisoner. Even had he done so I doubt if he would have been afraid. To know how he would have acted I would almost have been willing to have it happen; though, of course, it is better this way, and will give less trouble. There is no need to delay longer; I may as well begin at once."

The murmur of her voice came distinctly to the ears of the prisoner, and hardly had she spoken when she was in the greatest danger of her life. As she bent forward, Jack caught the gleam of a knife in her other hand, and it seemed to be raised after a threatening manner. It would have only taken a slight turn of the wrist, and a crook of the finger. Had it been a man in front of him, Jack would not have been able to contain himself.

But it was Eleena—and he waited.

She bent closer, and the blade came nearer; but there was no thrust. From her motions and her glances, Jack divined her intentions in time, and he did not shrink or shiver as she thrust the blade carefully between his teeth, and pried them apart with as gentle a force as it was possible for her to use.

As she forced them, so Jack allowed them to remain; and this appeared to be nothing more than was expected. From her breast she drew a small crystal vial, which she held up to the light, as she gazed at it in a thoughtful manner.

"A single drop upon his tongue will do the work. A dozen would—What use to speculate what they would do? I shall be careful that he does not get them, though the chances are that they will come, sooner or later, if he does not make good his escape from the ranch while yet there is time. A single drop. It is well that my hand is steadier than it was a few hours ago, or there might be danger that he got the overdose."

From the opened vial she dropped a single drop of the liquid it contained between the lips of the man.

Jack was on his guard. If one drop was

enough to rouse a sleeping man there was no telling what it would do to one who was wide-awake.

When the drop came between his lips, and lit upon his tongue, he saw that it went no further, and that there was no need of any repetition of the dose.

No doubt the suddenness of the result was a surprise.

Johnny's hand raised as though brought up by clock-work, and covered the Donna with the revolver; while an instant later his whole body moved, and he sat upright, staring at her in a way that was unpleasant to meet.

He seemed to recognize her, however, almost as soon as his eyes opened, for, as the Donna stepped back with a low cry of alarm, the muzzle of his weapon dropped.

"Pardon me if I looked like an aggressor; but it's my way, to draw first, and see what the matter is afterward, when I am awakened in a strange camp. I don't say that I would have shot until I was sure who it was at my bedside, but—hello! What's this? I didn't come here to bunk in, I'll swear to that. Pray explain what it is that has happened to me, and be careful what you are doing, meantime. I am naturally suspicious, and if I see anything that is not according to the letter of the law it is not certain which way your happy spirit will take its flight. Ha, ha! Pardon me! Of course it is all right; but I would really like to know what I am doing here."

"If I mistake not thou wert sleeping; and sleeping the sleep of the just. I should have been more careful how I aroused thee. Dost thou not understand, or hast thou forgotten what I said when I left thee here? For to-night the defenders of the Ranch of the Golden Dream are few, and the most of them of no great courage. There were evil men coming to inquire for thee, and it was safer to steal thee away for a time, until they had made their search and departed. For various reasons I did not care to resist them, or to anger them. When they were convinced that thou wert not here they went away without a murmur."

"And it has been on their account that thou has gone to all this trouble? Verily, if thou hadst wanted to save their lives a word to me would have been sufficient. I would have played them light as though I were a sleeping infant."

"Not theirs, but thine. A dozen to one, and thou in thy slumbers; what couldst thou have done? When the mistress of the Golden Dream cannot protect her visitors by strength she will fall back upon craft. That failing, thou canst be sure that I would be willing to die with them."

She spoke earnestly, and Atherton smiled after a kindly fashion as he listened.

"I doubt not thy good will; but I had more respect for thy judgment. If they came in no greater force than a dozen, Sanchez and I could have held the ranch till thy *vaqueros* returned; or, if need be, have swept the party into the *barranca*, which would make a convenient burying ground for such rash intruders."

"Perhaps. But when one lives alone it is sometimes better to work with craft than with killing. No doubt Sanchez would tell thee the same were he here; but he followed after the herdsmen, to see that their full duty was performed; and when Roldan and his rovers wander near the ranch, kindly as they have so far treated us, the servants would far rather run than fight. And thou must remember that I am but a woman, and that I had the safety of that other strange man, as well as the daughter, to look after. If thou art angry because I took the means that was best suited to provide for their safety, and thine, I hear it with sorrow; but have nothing to regret. The coast is now clear, and I would lead thee back to thy room, left so unceremoniously, there to finish what little is left of the night. This is but a cheerless spot, though it was a safe one. If I mistake not, no one knows of its existence but we two. Other cells are there; but this is so hidden among them that only a chance could discover the spring which throws open the door. On the others the fastenings are plain on the outside."

"Oh, I have no desire to linger, nor any right to complain. Only, if anything had happened to thee I might have lingered here for some centuries before any one came along to let me out. The sleeping beauty would have been no circumstance to it. Don't notice me if I talk a little at odds with my disposition. I have a racking headache, which is something I don't remember to have indulged in during the few years of my past pilgrimage."

"Follow, then, and thou shalt have all the chance to scold me thou canst desire. The headache will no doubt pass away when thou hast for a little breathed the fresher air above, and to-morrow this will have been but a spice of adventure to be laughed at. Come."

There was some plausibility about the explanation offered by Donna Eleena, and Jack was inclined to believe that there must be a foundation of truth that could be discovered by reading between the lines.

Certainly, she did not seem to meditate any present harm. She might have had visitors

whom it was not desirable that he should see. Two or three other reasons presented themselves why she should desire him temporarily out of the way; and the affair appeared to be something of a guarantee for the future. She could hardly expect to catch him twice with the same snare; or, that he would not guess what had been done to him. Without much suspicion, and with no fear at all, he followed; and he noted that she was taking the same route she had used in bringing him thither, and was not attempting to preserve its secret.

Up the stairway they went, and through the hidden door, which closed of itself as they passed through.

Then they found themselves in the hall, which was now lighted, though somewhat dimly, by a swinging lamp at the further end. He could distinguish the door of the room into which he had been originally ushered and with a word or two of leave-taking, and a gesture to indicate his room, Eleena was about to leave him, when there rung through the hall a shrill cry, that came, without a doubt, from the lips of a woman.

He might not know the voice; but Jack was certain that Morgiana uttered the scream, since it came from the room in which he knew she had retired to pass the night.

He asked for no explanation, and waited for no repetition; but sprang forward to learn what was meant by the alarm. In this house of secrets no cry of distress would pass unheeded, though elsewhere he might have thought twice before he would be guilty of what might turn out to be an intrusion. He flung himself against the door, and somewhat to his surprise it gave way before him, and he found himself within the room.

He came pistol in hand; and there was a chance for him to use the weapon. Apparently alarmed at the noise of his entry, a man turned away from the bedside of Morgiana, brushing past the judge, who had entered through an inner door which led to an adjoining room, and sprang upon the ledge of the open window.

It was hard to say, yet, whether it was a case for killing, and when Jack threw up his hands he did not intend to slay. A bullet along the skull of the man would drop him as surely as though it went through, and snap-shot though it might be he was certain that he could send it to exactly the right place.

But, as he pulled the trigger, Eleena came gliding to his side, and a slight touch of her elbow caused his wrist to move upward, so that the ball went whistling a foot above the head of the man, who, at the sound, dropped off of the ledge, and disappeared from sight. As he disappeared the cloak dropped from his shoulders, and there was a fleeting glimpse of his form. To Jack it looked like the figure of Sanchez, the Silent One, but he was not sure.

The suspicion did not stop him. He sprang recklessly forward, and with a loud cry from Eleena ringing in his ears, vaulted through the window.

"The *barranca*! Heaven help them! The wall goes sheerly down and they have fallen a thousand feet."

CHAPTER XII.

THE HISTORY OF A HAUNTED MAN.

THERE could be no question about the reality of the agitation displayed by Eleena. She darted forward to the window, gazed downward into the depths of the *barranca*, wrung her hands, and never even looked around when Morgiana came to her side, breathlessly inquiring what it all meant.

"I placed thee here because it seemed to be the safest spot in the hacienda. Thy windows looked out upon a chasm such as no man could scale; and from the passage thy door was guarded while the visitors who left but a short half-hour ago were within the house. It could have been no man; it must have been a ghost that awakened thee; and thy unfortunate cry has brought to his death a man who might have thrown away his life some day to better purpose."

Morgiana, in the course of her wanderings, had picked up some little knowledge of Spanish, though she did not profess to speak it. She caught the drift of Eleena's reproach, hastily as it was uttered; but when she answered, it was in her native tongue, which the Donna could understand as well as her own.

"Most unfortunate; but is it so certain that he is dead? He is a man that seemed to be hard to kill; and to be favored by fate. If it took a miracle to save him that miracle would, most likely, be on hand. Would it not be best to send some one to search the ground below? If he has not altogether escaped harm he may be needing our assistance."

"It shall be done; but neither fate nor skill could save him when he went head downward into that gulf. If they find his body it will be so heaten out of shape that his own mother would not know it. What said the man to cause that cry of thine, and was his face one ever seen by thee before?"

"He said nothing, and I saw not his face at all. The cloak concealed him, all save his eyes. When I awoke they were glaring at me like to

those of a basilisk, and I could not repress the scream. Certainly it was no production of my brain, since you two saw it."

"The wretch! The fiend!"

The interruption came from behind. Judge Janvrin was standing just where he had stood when he first caught sight of the intruder. He was staring out of the open window, and the words dropped from his mouth with a venom that showed how deeply he had been excited.

"It was I that she sought, and if she had found me she would have slain even as I slew her years ago. I should have buried her; I should have stamped her down deep, so that she could never come back again to life—though who can kill a witch? Did I? I thought so, but she is back to work her wicked will as she did before. It is all to go over again, since she has found me once more. And this time I must strike for Morgiana as well as myself."

One of his spells was on him, and it was different from anything that his daughter had yet seen. She was by his side in a moment.

"Fear not. It was but a passing fancy, such as you have had a thousand times before. We will watch for the rest of the night, and no harm will come to us while we are awake. To-morrow we will start on our journey again. We will find safety at last, never fear."

"Who says that I am afraid? I tell you I never was afraid. I simply executed justice. It was not fit that she should live longer, and I removed her. Do you think I am going to show the white feather, now that she has come back? No. I stir not from here until the work is finished that I began years ago. When she comes again, call me, but do it quietly. When I am face to face with her, and no one by to hold out a hand to either of us, then you may be sure that the safety for you will come, and my tired brain will have a chance to rest. I know now why it was that I have never had peace, and the next time I will make no mistake."

The judge rolled off his words one after the other, as though he was repeating a lesson by rote, and cared very little how he did it. He might have been a parrot if parrots ever said so much at a time.

Morgiana turned to the Donna.

"He is sometimes like this, when he has been suddenly awakened. If I talk with him for a little, I have no doubt but that he will come back to his senses. We are safe now; could you not leave us?"

"If you are not afraid to be with him, I can assure you, my child, that you are at liberty to act as you choose. I will make sure that there are no more intruders to-night. By to-morrow I hope he will have forgotten the tragedy which has unnerved us all. I will try and find one or two of my men to explore the *barranca*, according to thy desire. After that I will be within calling distance. There will be no more slumber for me this night."

As the judge shrunk back from her when she approached him, it did not seem to her judicious to remain longer, or to thrust upon the two offers of assistance. She hurried from the room, leaving father and daughter alone together.

After she had taken her departure, it seemed as though Janvrin was calmed a little. When his daughter had taken his hand the judge suffered himself to be led back unresistingly to his own room.

"See how one can be mistaken," he whispered to his daughter.

"For all these years I have thought her dead—slain by my hand. Yet, here I find her living, and prosperous. If the fears from which I fled were idle ones, and the law had as yet no hold on me, it may have been well, all the same, that I had them. I have wandered far and wide before I found this spot; but fate has sent me here to finish my work."

"Poor father! I think that it was too much work in the past which turned your brain. Would that we could rest here for a few days. I might have the chance to see what it is that is needed to bring you back to your senses once more."

"Trouble not your mind on that account. As I approached the hacienda it seemed to me that there was something familiar about it. All things are as I was told they were, and I seem very much like to be at home. I shall stay until she comes again. No evil spirits such as inhabit this ranch, can have power over you; and for myself I do not so much care, so that I have the chance to do justice to the wretch."

"You ought to know that you speak in riddles. I have vainly begged you more than once to tell me all the truth. Speak out; and, if you fear to trust me otherwise, I will take any oath that may seem good to you, not to reveal any part of the story as you tell it."

"Child, you know not what it is that you ask. It is a page in my life that is ever present before my eyes, and yet one that I would most willingly turn down forever. Probably you could not understand it; if you could it would only strike terror to your soul to hear it."

"Long as I have been with you I remember no time when I have showed that I had lack of courage; and I have sacrificed all to be with you, to aid and protect you. The time has come to know what it was from which you

were fleeing. Had I not thought that it was the literal truth which you told me I would not have come a step. Tell me now the whole story."

"So be it. And remember, if it seems strange beyond reason, that there has been just now some proof of the truth of what I have to say. You have gathered from what I said that I once killed; and that I fled from the ministers of the law, who seemed to be ever following me. Up to this night I supposed that I had slain a human being, and that human being was my wife."

Morgiana was listening with compressed lips; but at this announcement their came from between them, in spite of her resolution to keep silent, the words:

"Your wife! Heavens! My mother!"

"No, not your mother. Had she lived all would have been well with me; but I lost her when you were a babe, and shortly afterward married again. How it all came about I never could explain, save that I was fascinated as surely as is the bird which once looks into the eyes of a serpent. Few women have I seen more beautiful at times than was Donna Ursola."

"She was of Spanish, or Mexican, birth; and apparently had vast wealth at her command. At that time I wondered how it came that she should fix her regards on me, and thought myself the most favored of mortals. In addition to wealth and beauty she had a mind that was stored with all knowledge, so that we conversed for hours together on subjects of which the ordinary woman had not the average rudimentary conception."

"I was not an old man, even though a widower; and I had not outlived all romance, in spite of the way I had delved for knowledge. We planned a life that was to last for years, and that was to accomplish wonderful things. You were only an atom, and hardly disturbed my calculations. I gave you to your aunt to take care of, and settled a liberal allowance. She had children of her own, and but little to educate them on, so the arrangement was grateful to her, and I believe she grew to love you for your own sake, so that when she died, after faithful years of protection she hardly knew you from her own brood."

"In those early days Ursola told me of her solitary castle in the South, and we planned to spend some happy years there. I think that she must have been in earnest in her promises, strange as it was that she should make them. Even in the depths of my infatuation I sometimes felt that there was a veil in front of my idol, and that I saw her imperfectly. I little dreamed what was behind that veil."

"We were married, and for a time I gave up the profession in which I had already acquired reputation. We did not go to that castle in the South of which she had spoken; but drifted abroad, traveling through the lands of the East."

"Even yet I am willing to admit that she was the most fascinating woman, the most accomplished, the most truly feminine, during the first few months of that journey, that I ever met or dreamed of. Perhaps she was all the more fascinating because of the mystery with which, after a short time, she impressed me. How or why I could not have told, but it was not long until I felt that she had not given me all her confidence. At first, I was alarmed on account of her health. She began to droop; at times the brilliancy of her beauty faded, and I almost thought that she was looking old and haggard. Then came another horrible suspicion."

"There was a hungry gleam in her eyes that savored of insanity. Not always, you understand; but now and then, when she dropped her orbs so that she thought I could not see into them. The first time I caught it was by means of the reflection of a looking-glass. I questioned her, but she laughed at me, and refused to take medical advice. What was the use, she asked, when she knew more than nine-tenths of the faculty, and as much as the rest?"

"To this day I do not know that she was not mad—sometimes I think that she was; and at all times that she was a monster from her birth. From her birth! Heavens! Was she ever born? Now that I can consider calmly some of the things which she said to me in a matter-of-course way, I think that she must have lived a thousand years. I know that as her face grew weirder her knowledge began to appall me; and she began to hint at dark mysteries that were then beyond my comprehension."

"Then came the time that I had to leave her. I received a telegram that you were dead. It was a mistake, since you rallied again, and in an hour the membrane in your throat was broken, and you were out of danger. But I did not receive the correction until I was about to embark at Liverpool. I turned back; for my wife was more to me then than an infant I had scarcely seen. Foolish man that I was, I sent no word before me of my coming, and thought that the surprise would do her good. There was a surprise; but I was the one to receive it. I found—Heaven! I found—"

He ceased speaking, and his face took on the look it had worn while he was speaking but lately in the presence of Donna Eleena. Had his

daughter become unnerved he would have broken out wilder than ever.

"Hush, dear," she said quietly. "You found, what?"

"I found that she was a—vampire. She had been pining for a victim; and in my absence had procured one, that now lay on our bed, its neck bathed in its own blood. She had bit deeper than she thought in her avenging haste."

"I killed her. No child of mine should live with that taint in its blood. I slew her there, with her face pressed close to the neck of her victim; and then fled. Since then, at times, I may have seemed crazy. If so, what wonder? That is the true story. What need of the minutest details. And this is the ranch to which Ursola vowed she would one day lead me; to night, I saw her eyes as they were in her maddest moments. Do you not believe me, then, when I say that fate has brought me hither, and that there is work for me here to do?"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE VISIT TO THE BARRANCA.

ELEENA had spoken truly when she said that there would be no more rest for her that night.

She had strong nerves, and was accustomed to adventure of one kind or another; but the events had affected her even more than she knew. She was sure that the young American had fallen to his death, and yet demanded confirmation. Had it not been that her presence in the hacienda seemed necessary, and that she feared to face what she might discover if she made the toilsome journey to the bottom of the *barranca*, she might have dared the night and toil, and found out beyond peradventure.

As she had said, her house was unusually bare of attendants, nearly all the male retainers being out watching the herds, or waiting to see that the Indians did not return. It was scarcely probable that the savages would come back after their late discomfiture, yet they might make a desperate effort at retaliation if they found that the people of the Golden Dream were off their guard.

A couple old men there were, left behind, who took care of the horses that were used from the hacienda; and these, after some search, were found.

They knew the road to the rocks beneath the hacienda; but they were not at all anxious to take the journey, even though a large gratuity was hinted at if they returned speedily, with positive news. They had their own ideas about the *barranca*, and what they would find there; and shook their heads, muttering something about ghosts, and demons.

Nevertheless, after some urging, they went on the mission, while Eleena returned to watch in the hall, near to the rooms of the American and his daughter.

The Donna was sure that the danger—if danger there had been for the two—was over for the night; but she held her promise as sacred; and perhaps she felt more at ease being near to them than she would have done in her own room, alone, or with the companionship of a superstitious maid.

She threw herself upon a chair, and tried to compose herself to rest; but it was impossible to remain in one position long. She arose and walked the floor. She listened. She went into the room that adjoined that of Janvrin, and gazed downward from the window, striving to see if there was any form hanging anywhere to the jagged rocks. She vibrated between this spot and her chair in the hall. When she thought that her messengers had time to reach the foot of the rocky wall she looked more anxiously than ever. All was dark beneath, and experience should have told her that her eyesight could not take in half the depth; yet it seemed that perchance she might catch a glimpse of the light the men carried in their search, and thus be able to guess the nearer when she might expect their return.

She might as well have gone to her couch and tried to sleep. She saw nothing and heard nothing, until at last for very shame she closed the window and went back to it no more.

The least time in which the journey could be made was an hour; after night it might take two. There was also a fair chance for some accident, which would delay the return of the messengers indefinitely. Two hours having passed, Eleena noted that daybreak was near at hand, and wondered if the men would come with it. After a little she went out, and stood in the *patio* to listen. Then she could hear them approaching, and hoped that the suspense would soon be over. As they halted at the front of the hacienda she stepped forward to meet them.

They brought no burden, and both were there, so that she knew they had not found a living being—how was it about a corpse? She asked the question so suddenly, stepping out from the shadows as she spoke, that the men were more frightened than they had been when they entered the *barranca*, and it was more chance than courage that kept them from headlong flight.

Seeing this Eleena spoke to them again, in a reassuring tone, that now they recognized; and they made their report.

They had gone to the only path which led down into the chasm; and without wasting a moment had made the descent, and hastened to reach the spot where any one dropping from the window would be apt to alight. They there searched long and carefully, but not a trace of human presence could be found. There was not even a smutch of blood on the rocks, nor a shred of torn clothing. If any one fell into the *barranca*, either he had escaped, or his body had been carried away. This they swore to, with as strong oaths as they could conveniently use in the presence of a lady; and having been questioned some little, and paid well for their services, they went away shaking their heads, and thinking there must be something wrong with the mistress at the Golden Dream.

"It will not do to start in too great haste; and an hour or two from now will do," thought Eleena, returning to her watch.

"The body may be gone; but by daylight I think I can find some signs of which way it went. Of course, he must be dead, though it may be as well not to be too certain, or say too much to others in regard to the matter. I had thought that they would come back with a report that there were two corpses there instead of one. If I find neither I will begin to think that there is something mysterious about the whole matter."

Of those who had been troubled by the occurrences of the previous night, the judge in the morning, bore the least trace of broken slumbers and troubled brain. He greeted the Donna with courtly politeness, and never once alluded to what had transpired. He simply said that they found themselves so wearied by the journey of the past few days that it would be toilsome to proceed further without some rest. Therefore, they had decided to accept the invitation they had refused the preceeding evening, and remain at the ranch a few days, for rest and recuperation. It would not be for long, and they would try to give no trouble.

"Trouble! Speak not of it. My house is thine, and all that is under its roof. Remain a lifetime if it so suits. I think I can guarantee thy safety; and some time, at thy leisure, I shall try to induce thee to tell the story of thy life, which I am willing to swear is a strange one. I must be gone some hours, and if it will suit thee, thy company on the trip would be a pleasure. Otherwise, use this house as thine own until my return."

There was more really meant than is usually the case with the lavish protestations of a Mexican householder. He may be willing to give away all that he has; but it is altogether in his mind; and deeply would he resent the attempt to hold him strictly to his offers.

The Janvins, however, were safe persons to make such offers to. Morgiana thought chiefly of her father—though she could not think of Gilt-Edge Jack without a thrill of horror at his probable fate. They did not care to wander over the plain on horseback, and as the Donna did not mention her intention of searching for the body of Atherton they declined to accompany her. While they talked together there was a light step at the door and turning they saw Sanchez, the Silent One.

He came in booted and spurred, as though from a long ride. He cast a curious glance at the trio, then bowed deeply, murmured a word or two of regret if they had waited for him to join them at breakfast, and threw himself into a chair at the table like one who was well tired with his work.

At his entrance Eleena started, and turned pale. It took a few moments, and some effort, to recover her self-possession. Then she spoke, in a low tone telling him something of the affair of the previous night—so far as related to the intrusion on the room of Morgiana, and the leap through the window of the intruder, and the young American. She also announced her intention of visiting the *barranca* below, and looking for traces of the two.

"Thy duty, perhaps; but the task is a useless labor. I will wager that of neither will a trace be found. The one was a ghost; and the other a man hard to kill until his time shall come. Look not so solemn. Before nightfall he will turn up, as handsome and as hardy as ever. Still, it is duty, as I said; and one that Sanchez will not shrink from aiding thee to perform. The ride of the night was a hard one, particulars of which will I give thee as we go along. Grant me a few moments for rest—a score of them will be enough—and then I take the saddle again."

"Thanks. Without thee at my elbow, to counsel and assist, I have done but badly. Perhaps if thou hadst been here this thing would not have occurred. We will think twice before we will consent to be left alone again."

Sanchez smiled, but spoke no more. When half an hour had elapsed he was in the saddle, and riding again at the elbow of Eleena. Save that he was a little more taciturn, if possible, than ever, the mission on which they were bound affected him not at all.

The *barranca* might not have been a thousand feet in depth, but it was a gloomy place, and its bottom was far below the level of the plain.

At some distance from the hacienda there was a bridle-path, barely practicable, by which the two descended.

Long and earnestly did the Donna search, but with no better fortune than her messengers had met with. It was an impossibility that any one could have fallen from above and retained life and strength enough to crawl away; yet it seemed impossible that Jack could have escaped taking the drop. There was a mystery about it; and as she said so to her companion she looked at him as though she thought he might be able to give her the solution if he wished to.

But Sanchez kept his own counsel; and after it seemed certain that there was nothing more to be learned there, they left the spot and ascended once more to the plain.

"Which way, now?" asked Sanchez, as he noted that Eleena turned the head of her horse away from the hacienda.

"Such men as he are here to-day and gone to-morrow. If he escaped with his life he was well satisfied to say good-by to the ranch without troubling its mistress. By this time he may be a score of miles from here. More than likely he is, since I have learned that the mustang he rode hither has disappeared."

"His horse gone? Why no word of this before?" cried Eleena, turning sharply on her companion.

"It might have been possible to have followed the trail, and thus eased my mind all the sooner."

"If thou hadst not sufficient interest to inquire, how is it that I should be expected to remember to mention it sooner? It was the first thing I thought to look after this morning when I heard what bustle was being made over the wanderer; and that was so long ago that I forgot till thy action called it once more to my mind."

"It does not follow that it was taken by him. It may have been ridden by mistake; or broke loose, to search for its master."

"Scarcely. I would not like the insurance of the neck of the man who attempted to mount it without the permission of its master; and since he told it to wait for him, the well-trained brute would starve at its rope before it would move an inch, save at his bidding. A wonderfully trained mustang it was, if what I heard is but half-true."

The Donna eyed him suspiciously while he spoke. He appeared to know altogether too much about the animal and its master.

"Were it not that I know he can protect his own head against all human foes, I might think that thou hadst taken a hand in this same disappearance—willing, perhaps, to spare my nerves if he was dead; and more than half ready to accomplish his removal if he survived the tumble. If I did not know that under the compact, as my guest, he would be sacred, I might ask thee where to find him, and so lose no more time in aimless search."

"The man saved my life but yesterday afternoon. For that, if for nothing else, he should be safe from me. Strange that thou hast not spoken once of the other man, the pursuit of whom led your friend out of the window. There are no traces of him below; and yet it seems no wonderful thing. Perhaps the two have gone together. Who knows what sort of a league may have been formed, with the possession of thy ranch as its object."

"There was no other man. To one who has lived at the hacienda of the Golden Dream, that part is not hard to understand. It is not the first time I had a glimpse of the specter of the man in a cloak. Perhaps, if I had warned them that it was liable to appear, it might have saved sorrow. The demon troubles me not; but others are not so dispassionate."

"Have it as thou wilt. I have reason to believe that the man lives. If thou art not convinced, spend the day in looking for him. It might be used to worse advantage."

"And I have reason to believe that he will be found near a spot which he spoke of. After his taste of our quality, he might not care to spend longer time within our walls; but he will not go far until that man meets him of whom he spoke, his partner in a mine that they have discovered. It will not be hard to find the spot, since he gave some description of it. Once I know that he is safe, and needs no care, and if he so chooses, I will trouble him no more."

"Thou art a woman, and he a man. Once the trouble is begun, and promises will stop it not. Accomplish thy destiny, however; and remember, when it seems not to thy taste, that Sanchez tried to give thee a friendly warning. If thou art wise, thou wilt leave him alone: if thou art hardened in thy folly, I go with thee to see how it endeth."

Eleena said no more. She understood the hints of Sanchez, since they were rather plainly given; but she did not think them worthy of notice. Of course, she must look after the man who had done her such service, and convince him that she was not his enemy. After that, he might return, or not, as he chose.

It was not hard to find the trysting-place that Jack had spoken of—and sure enough, at the same time, she found—the Gilt-Edge Sport.

CHAPTER XIV.

SANCHEZ MAKES A BARGAIN.

MR. ATHERTON was taking his ease; and had probably been sleeping. His head was on his saddle, and he lay with an air of careless abandon; but as the two approached his eyes opened, and it seemed to Eleena that his revolver must have been in his hand, for though it lay on the ground, his fingers were at the trigger, and the muzzle pointed toward the intruders.

The fact was that he had drawn it when he heard the tramping of horses at no great distance, though the motion was so deftly made that Eleena would scarcely have seen it even if she had been looking on.

As they came nearer he raised leisurely until he had reached a sitting posture. By that time Eleena had drawn her mustang in and come to a halt. There could no longer be any doubt about his escape, and so she felt vastly relieved. At the same time she scarcely knew what to say. There was certainly an excuse for his going; and very good reason why he should not care to venture back. If it had not been for feminine curiosity as to how he had been preserved from death she would rather have turned and ridden away than begin a conversation.

"So we have found the truant!" was her salutation.

"Had I thought sooner of what you said about your appointment with the man you called the Daisy it would have saved me a great deal of uneasiness, and some disagreeable work. I have been searching the bottom of the *barranca* for your flesh and bones; to say nothing of the hours of waiting I did, for the scouts I had out last night. Why did you not at least let us know that there were no bones broken? Then, if you did not care to accept longer our hospitality you could have left peace behind you when you rode away."

"Bless my soul! I did not think that there would be any worry over my absence. I went away in very good company; and followed the track of what seemed to be the family ghost. It is true that I fell some two thousand feet, more or less, and touched rock bottom when I landed, but such little adventures are an ordinary occurrence with me; and I have got into the way of thinking that other people will take them quite as a matter of course, and ask no questions about how I fared. If I have given you any uneasiness I offer a thousand apologies, and will promise not to do so again."

He was laughing as he spoke, and seemed inclined to make light of the whole thing. By so doing of course he lessened the chances of curious questions being asked. After the way he spoke of it, it was more doubtful than ever whether he had fallen at all.

"Really, I do not know what to make of you. I have seen you go through dangers that looked as though they must slay; and if you say that you fell I will have to believe you. Are you sure that I am talking to a living mortal? Ghosts do not generally walk by daylight, but this might be an exception to the rule."

"And you must remember that I am not walking, so that the general rule does not count. I may be a phantom after all."

"Scarcely. There is nothing hollow about your tones. They belong to a man in remarkably good health and spirits. Jest aside, we have been vastly troubled about you. It is not our custom to allow visitors to the Ranch of the Golden Dream to depart without some little leave-taking. And I counted somewhat on you to aid me in entertaining your compatriots, who have agreed to stay some days with me. They certainly show more courage than you, for they do not intend to be frightened away by a bit of unpleasantness, such as would not be apt to show itself again if they were to live and remain for a thousand years. Forgive us, then, for what was as unpleasant to us as it was to you, and come back to the ranch. At least make it your headquarters so long as you remain in this section of the country—which, after all, is not the worst in the world."

"I may be selfish; but, honestly, I have a great liking for the open air. The country is all right. Never found one that I liked better. Seems to have a good effect on my nerves. All is slow, calm, and quiet. No mystery, everything plain sailing, and the inhabitants without any mystery about them. Why, you couldn't drive me away—before the Daisy came. Pardon me if I hesitate to accept the invitation, which is no doubt cordially meant. I may see you later; but at present I want to get a glimpse of the Daisy. Give my regards to the judge and his daughter, and tell the latter in a private way, that the sooner she gets that father of hers back to the civilization of the States the better it will be for her."

There was no use spending time with this man who made light of everything; and, though he did not say so, showed by his actions he did not consider the hacienda a safe place to visit. Eleena gave it up. She might have made one more effort to make her peace with her late visitor, had it not been for the presence of Sanchez. There was a sneer on his lips as he listened, and his eyes were settled on the face of the sport as though he saw through the flimsiness of the pretext that he had made.

"I suspect that you are offended; and if you are I do not know that I blame you. If the time comes that you can forgive, remember that you will be both a welcome and an honored guest. For to-day, unless you reconsider your determination, I bid you good-by."

She nodded gayly and waved her hand, Sanchez bowed with a gravity that belonged to him in his silent moods, and the two rode off.

When they were fairly out of sight of the spot on which Jack had made his camp, Sanchez abruptly turned away, saying as he bore upon his bridle-rein:

"With the mad American and his still madder daughter, I think you can be trusted, and it is time that I was looking after the *vaqueros* who should be returning from the pursuit. If they overtook not the few who escaped there may be a campaign here that will render the ranch too hot for comfort, seasoned as we are. I will see thee at dinner hour."

Eleena was glad to be relieved of his presence. She might have extended her ride if he had shown a desire to keep by her side; with him away she felt more like meeting her visitors at the ranch, and she rode back at a gallop.

"I doubt not that he is more interested than he seems," muttered Sanchez, with a shrug of his shoulders as he rode away.

"When he thinks she has made a fair offering he will follow for another glimpse; and if he is as shrewd as I think, he will not fail in obtaining it. It is the way with these men who know how to conquer. Outwardly they seem as cold as ice. Let him look on her. She is beautiful; but there are other women in the world; and something tells me that she has not long to live. So he follows her I care not what he thinks for the present. It will take him out of the way. Roldan should meet me somewhere near this spot. I would that it was further away from where the American has chosen to fix his headquarters; but so long as he has eyes only for the Donna there is very little danger that he will think of us."

Though he occasionally looked back he saw nothing of Gilt-Edge Jack, and would have been an unbeliever if some one had told him how near the sport was, and that he was likely to assist at the coming interview.

That he was able to do this was somewhat chance; and, for the rest, the fault of the Silent One. He had chosen a course that would shield him from the view of any one at a distance; but that made it the easier to follow him unperceived. When, at last, he was joined by a dashing-looking cavalier, who was well-mounted, thoroughly armed, and had the air of quite a desperate gentleman, Atherton was near enough to overhear what they said, though uncertain who was in front of him.

"Thy swoop was a failure, and it would have been better had it been let alone," was the greeting of Sanchez.

"Perhaps it was my fault in part; but I thought not that she would take the matter so seriously. He is a friend after my own heart, and I am not certain that I will not take him under my protection, not, of course, to interfere with the matter talked of by you and me. Thy visit, which I feared would make her wild with anger, has scarcely made a ripple on the surface."

"But what the foul fiend did she do with him? She was altogether too willing that I should explore the house, to find him if I could. When she spoke that way, and led me to the room that she averred had been his, I knew that there was no use to push matters further, and retired as gracefully as I could. I was not so sure that there was not some game behind it all, that would break the truce after a fashion that would leave me in the lurch."

"Not sure am I that it was not a favor that she hath done thee. If she had told him of thy expected coming, and asked him to defend himself, it might have fared badly enough with thee and thy dozen followers when his pistols began to talk. For the present, take my advice, and leave him alone, unless he undertakes to interfere with thee, and thy plans. He is waiting for the pard of his that was to meet him hereabouts; and he will not move for a reasonable time. If Eleena can prevent it, I am not sure that he will move at all."

"Caramba! It is that which I fear most of all. He is too handsome a young tiger to have the free range of the hacienda."

"Yet it might be better to have him there than searching for that same friend of his. I tell thee, he is a man whom it will be hard to beat if he gets his head turned in thy direction; and if he knew that he might find traces of that pard by searching in a particular direction, and that little chance is there of his ever seeing him again unless he does, I doubt if anything short of the smiles of Eleena would stop him."

"So much more the reason why he should be put where he can do no harm. I hate cold-blooded murder; but it may come to that, since I failed to trap him for the present emergency."

"Let the man be, then, till I give the word. For the present I think he is safe; and something tells me that it will be neither wise nor

lucky to interfere with him, save as a last resource. He is my creditor in the matter of life-saving, and though I pay no debts when it is inconvenient, I have a bit of human nature about me, and am inclined to love my friends when I can afford it. What else is there to report?"

"We need thee to help us out. The secret that thou hast told us was no doubt of worth according to its price; but there must be a sequel to it or we can make but scant profit on our labor. It will pay thee handsomely, no doubt; but either thy share must be the smaller, or both must be larger."

"And how knowest thou that I can give thee any greater information than that I have already furnished; and if I could, what reason that I should do so?"

"That half the loaf is better than no bread. I and my men might better be harrying the ranches and plundering the unwary traveler, than laboring for less coin. Show us where to find the true vein and we are yours henceforth to command. Refuse, and though the Donna is much to my liking I fear that thou canst not count much longer on the aid of Roldan and his rovers. We labor not for naught."

Sanchez did not immediately answer. He was evidently revolving some question in his mind. When he did speak it was more to himself than to the other.

"I doubt if there is much gratitude in man; and it is certain that he is never satisfied. It would be enough, he thought, but a few short months ago, if he could be guided to the old shaft from which came the wealth that filled the coffers of the Golden Dream. For a time it was sufficient; but increase of appetite hath grown by what it fed on; and now he asks the earth; and if he cannot have that he would be content with the share that was reserved to me. I pointed out to him a bride that might be won; and he is not sure that he would not prefer to cut purses than manage the affairs of the hacienda. Such is man. Suppose I show him the spot where the ore is a hundred times as rich—not long would it be before he would be asking that it come in solid blocks of virgin gold, and that it be already loaded upon the backs of the mules. Because two Americans have been found wandering near he expects an invasion of a whole army to follow, and would slay them, even though I call them my friends. I let him have his own will in that, for a time, knowing that the American could protect his head if that head was worth the protecting. If I had not done so there would have been a rupture of the treaty that has protected us at the hacienda. At another time I might laugh, and ask the American to stand my friend against the rovers. If he gave me his hand on it I doubt not that he would be worth more than the dozen, either in an honest fight, or an honest dividend of whatever treasure may yet be left in the mine. Yet there is work to be done that he would have none of; and so I must bargain with Roldan. How is it? Can I trust thee to do the work that is in hand, even if it involves the life of a man and a woman?"

"Not the life of Eleena?"

"No. She may still be thy game if thou canst win her. But the two visitors at the ranch, father and daughter, must be taken care of. Why, is for me to know. If thou canst promise to serve me in that without a murmur I will join thee again at the mine, and show thee where to look for the better ore, which will yield, as I said, a hundred for the one that is now in sight. It is an old secret, and has been well kept. Weren't not that I have need of wealth more than thou wilt find in the present drift in years I would not make the promise. I must have the half, even as I am supposed to have it now; and I warn thee that the account will be strictly kept."

"Thy hand. The half will be thine; and for the idiots in thy way—tell me what it is that thou hast in view and it shall be done."

"And for the present the American who was poaching on thy preserves shall be held harmless?"

"As thou wilt have it."

"Agreed, then. It is not certain as yet how it will be best to move. I have two courses in view. Come to me to-night, an hour after sunset, at the place where we met yesterday afternoon, and I will tell thee the rest."

Some little conversation followed, but it told the listener nothing more, though he managed to gather nearly every word; and as it was not likely that anything would be gained by running further risk, the Gilt-Edge Sport silently withdrew, highly edified with what he had heard.

CHAPTER XV.

STRANGE DISCOVERIES AT THE RANCH.

THE conversation had told Jack almost everything that he wished to know. The Daisy was probably in the hands of Roldan, if the latter had not already killed him. Sanchez was bargaining about the life, or at least the liberty, of the judge and his daughter, and was selling to the outlaw captain information in regard to the very mine which he and his pard had discovered. Although the Silent One had made a stipulation

with regard to his present safety, there was no telling how long those good intentions would continue. The most unsatisfactory part was that which related to Eleena. Had she any interest in the mine, or was it for her interest that Sanchez was imparting the secret? It seemed that a bargain in regard to her had been made between Sanchez and the leader of the rovers; but was not Sanchez her prime minister, and did she not know all about it?

After this fashion ran the thoughts of the sport as he silently withdrew from the neighborhood. It was certain that there was some truth in the explanation which Eleena had given him, much as he doubted it at the time. And it was reasonably sure that there was no use to wait longer for the coming of the Daisy, if he was in the hands of the rover. He would have to look for him, and at the same time he would be able to keep an eye on the interests of Janvrin and his daughter. For their sake he was willing to return to the hacienda, so that he might put them on their guard.

There was no hurry about that, however. From what had been said, he was sure that nothing would be done before nightfall, and probably not for some hours later. Then, perhaps, there might be another intrusion into the rooms of the Janvrins, and he laughed as he thought that it was quite likely he would be there again to interrupt it.

He wished that he knew where the meeting-place was, to which Sanchez had alluded; but he thought that it would be very strange if he could not get an eye on the Silent One as he went to the conference; and once on the trail it would be no great task to follow, and again overhear the plans of the plotters.

"If the Daisy was only here to take that part of the contract off of my hands, I hardly think I would look in on them at the ranch this afternoon. As it is, I guess I will have to hold on till I know what it is that the old gent has to look out for. I suppose he will be as crazy as a loon on a mill-pond the first day after ice breaks up, but the young lady can think for both of them, and I will give the warning to her if he don't show more sense than I have seen in him yet. Wonder how they come to run into the game of Don Sanchez? He is hardly afraid that they will strike that mine in their prospecting tour. Am afraid he has his mind set on the daughter."

With that last idea coming up in a way that troubled somewhat, Jack decided to quit thinking over the matter altogether, and so went back to his camp and laid himself down in a tolerably well contented frame of mind. He was safe for the present, and had plenty of the kind of work he liked for the near future. His pipe never tasted sweeter, and the day went along on wings that were anything but leaden. Toward evening he prepared himself for business, looked over his revolvers as a matter of instinct, and moved off toward the hacienda, intending to take up a position where he could catch sight of Sanchez, starting out for the interview.

He secured the position that he had marked out from the first; and without being seen, or seeing any one. He waited long and patiently. He went without the solace of his pipe, and remained so long in one position that his limbs began to be drawn up in knots with cramp. Night came down and the moon came up—but there were no signs of Sanchez.

"Might have known it. When a fellow of my age and experience bets on a sure thing the sure thing isn't there. Fact is, there is no such thing. Sanchez is a sly old fox, and has suspected that, as I haven't put in an appearance, I must have a scheme. When he got that far the rest was easy. He has altered his plan, or has gone around some other way. Guess the best scheme will be to go direct to the ranch. Hunting around these plains for two men in a confab beats the needle-in-the-haystack search three to one. After her invitation of to-day the Donna can hardly close the door in my face, and if she does there will be so much the more reason for having an interview with the Janvrins. Of course, I can get that by trying that trip through the *barranca* again; but I am not as greedy as I might be; and I will leave that as a last resort."

He was not too busy with his reflections to note that the building was illuminated after its usual extravagant fashion, and that there did not appear to be any excitement or unusual bustle about. It might be that he was already forgotten. At any rate, he made up his mind to make a visit; and as his mustang was near by, and the distance still too far for a comfortable walk, he mounted, and dashed up in his best style.

As he drew nearer he could see that though the lights were gleaming in the windows there were no figures to be seen moving about through the rooms, and there was a silence that somehow sent a chill through him. Had any evil happened; and if so, to whom?

There was no trouble about entering the building. Doors and windows were alike open; and as no one responded to his call he took the liberty of going straight forward.

"Looks as though the household had gathered themselves together and fled. Heaven! Roldan

could hardly have sacked the establishment while I was looking on. I may not be able to see through a grindstone, but I am hardly that blind. Here are the remnants of the dinner; and from the disposition of things I should say that Sanchez, Eleena, and the two Janvrins took their time at the table. But where have they gone to; and which way is one to look?"

Leaving the dining room the sport made his way toward the room of the judge. His steps sounded gloomily through the hall, and he was possessed with a dread that he had never felt when he had been in any personal danger, no matter how great. At the door he halted, and dropping his head to the panel listened, though he felt that it was scarcely worth his while. If the judge had been in the house he would have been touching the strings of his beloved violin long before this. There was no sound of any moving thing within; and he knocked on the panel.

No answer.

"Not much danger of being shot for a burglar; guess the best plan is to see what has been going on inside. Don't often go wrong in my presentiments; and I have one of the largest kind on hand at the present speaking. Here goes."

He tried the lock of the door, and found that it was not fastened. The door swung open and he looked into the empty room.

At first glance it looked as though the occupant had but left it a few moments. There were no signs of a struggle, and things were scattered around after the fashion that prevails in the room of a careless man who considers himself at home.

But Jack was not satisfied with the first glance. In one corner of the room stood the violin box of the judge, and near it the violin, as it had been carelessly deposited on the table. He went toward them, and then stopped suddenly. The moonlight from the window, and the lamp-light from the hall, showed him a dark splotch on the floor, upon which he was just about to set his foot.

He recognized it, or thought that he did. He bent down, and lit a match to make sure.

The splotch was where a pool of fresh blood had soaked into the carpet. It was still wet, and here and there, on the face of it, there were little clots. Some one had been hurt, and badly. Who could it be unless Janvrin? Roldan had no doubt been there; but, where was the body? and where was the daughter?"

Through the connecting door he passed, into the other room; but, though he searched through it carefully there were no traces of any violence. The window that looked out upon the *barranca* was stoutly fastened; and the bolt to the door that led to the hall was in its socket. It seemed to be evident that Morgiana had retired to her room after leaving the table, or the door would not have been fastened from the inside; and that she had left the room through that of her father, though there were no traces of a struggle there, either.

"It is the blood on the floor that makes it certain there has been foul play. If it was not for that I might think they had just stepped out. I'll find out something more, if I have to search the whole house, and the vaults to boot. Perhaps those last would be the best points to begin with, anyhow."

But Jack was general enough to want to secure his rear; so he determined to make a more thorough search of the upper part of the house before trying the lower regions.

He had no idea which rooms were the ones dedicated to the use of the Donna; but, if he had known ever so well he would not have expected to find anything in them that would explain what had been going on. He went from room to room, finding nothing, until at last he halted before a door that was partially ajar.

Within the room there was a light burning, and a single glance told him that its regular occupant was a female. That caused him to hesitate long enough to give a gentle rap, and then wait for an answer.

He received none; and yet, in the silence, it seemed, to his surprise, that he could hear a faint breathing within.

"It may be an intrusion, but under the circumstances there ought to be pardon for the sin. Here goes!"

And without further delay the Gilt-Edge Sport stepped inside.

His ears had not deceived him. There was an occupant to the room; and that occupant was Donna Eleena.

She was resting across her bed, as though she might have flung herself carelessly down for a moment's rest, when she entered the room after dining, and had been overtaken by slumber unawares.

"Excuse me," said the sport, without hesitating. "This may be startling, but there is good cause for it. Madame!"

He spoke loud enough to awaken an average sleeper. He knew that Eleena had slept but little the night before, and hoped that he saw a way for her out of knowledge of what had happened. True, he had his suspicions, which he had conned over in his mind quite freely; and yet—he felt that he would be all the happier to

know that she had no part or lot in the plans of Sanchez and the captain of the rovers.

But Eleena did not hear him. She did not even stir uneasily in her sleep, as his very presence, even, might have been expected to cause her to do.

He called to her again, this time quite loudly, and with not quite as much apology in his method. There was no time to waste; and she might be only shamming.

But no sham was there. As he advanced nearer, and looked attentively at the fair face before him, he saw something which caused him to suspect that this sleep was more than natural.

She did not look like one who was under the influence of a drug; but he had seen trances before; and this looked like one.

"It is either sham or mesmerism," he said to himself, as he touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Sanchez may be a deeper villain than I thought for. Let us see."

The touch had no more effect than the call; and when he held a lamp to her face, and gently parted her eyelids, the eyes never quivered at the glare.

"Mesmerism, sure enough. Wonder if the party who worked the spell had any idea that she would fall into the hands of a past master of the art. Guess I can use the reverse passes; and if my will is not the stronger, she will just have to sleep till the end of time. There will be an elegant mixture in her nerves; and it will take a joint council to bring her to life again. I am not sure that it is the wisest thing in the world to try the experiment; but here goes, anyhow."

And with knit brows, and with a determination to call back the mind of the sleeping woman, wherever it might be wandering, he began to make the mystic passes which he hoped would restore her to consciousness.

CHAPTER XVI.

WHAT ATHERTON FOUND WHEN HE EXPLORED THE BARRANCA.

THERE were few things which the Gilt-Edge Sport had not dabbled in; and fewer still that he did not master when he once set himself squarely to do so. He knew well enough that he was an intruder here, and that under other circumstances he was doing what he deserved to be shot for.

But there was life at stake, and the liberty of a woman. He knew not what was behind the apparent scheme of Sanchez; but that he meant to slay the father and capture the daughter was almost certain from what was said to the captain of the rovers; and it looked as though he had done both. Whether or not the Donna had part and parcel in the plot, there was no use to be squeamish. When he had made the passes he took her left hand firmly in his, and looked her steadily in the face.

"She carted me off when I was supposed to be insensible: if she is playing the same game she can hardly make a louder objection than I did. Eleena, awaken!"

So he spoke, though he did not allow his words to interfere with the fixed resolve he had in his mind.

The result justified his intentions. There was a shiver all through the form of the woman; a shrinking and a swaying, as though it was being racked by some powerful internal forces; and then her eyes opened with a wandering look.

Then her senses came back, slowly though surely. A look of indignation flashed from her eyes as she saw that a man stood by her bedside; and felt that he was holding her hand with a grasp of steel.

At first she did not recognize him; and an angry exclamation rose to her lips.

"Pardon, madame; and take the situation as coolly as I did under the same circumstances. There is something to be explained; and getting angry will hardly help you to do it. I can understand that you have been a victim; but you must have some knowledge of what went before. Where are the Janvrins; and who caused them to disappear?"

"I do not understand; but I do know that your intrusion here is unwarrantable. I demand that you leave the spot at once. Then, if I find that there is any reason why I should do so, I will grant you an interview. It will certainly be at a more appropriate place. If I had a weapon at hand I doubt if you would be living now."

She was angry, no doubt; and yet not as angry as she seemed to wish to be. Though he had rejected her invitation at the time, he had come back to her, after all.

"Investigation will show a splotch of blood on the floor of the room in which the judge spent last night; and if you look further you will learn that he and his daughter are nowhere to be found. You will also learn that you and I are the only occupants of the building, unless the others have all retired to the cellars and the cells beneath the hacienda. I came hither to warn the judge that there was a plot afoot, and as no one answered to my call I entered the house. It seemed to be strangely emptied of

every one, and I had searched nearly every room before I found you in what I recognized as a hypnotic sleep. I had my doubts whether I could awaken you—speaking to you had no effect. But I made the effort, and succeeded. Had I not come when I did there is no telling how long it would have been before you would have come out of the state. I think thanks are due instead of a scolding, but I have no time to debate the question. Can you give me any further information? If not, in the slang of the mines—I'll see you later."

"A moment! I should be angry, but after your explanation I do not know that I feel mortally offended. As you say, the case is the same as last night, only the positions have been reversed. Let me see. I have no remembrance of coming here. The last that I remember was rising from the table, and passing out of the room. Perhaps my footsteps were guided hitherwards just after I had lost my knowledge of what was around me, but I cannot conceive how the thing could have been done. I know nothing of Janvrin, but I would stake my life on the honesty of his daughter. Otherwise, I might have fears that the family diamonds have disappeared, and that the missing visitors had gone with them. You say that there is blood on the floor?"

Gradually the Donna was recovering her wit and wisdom. At the last she spoke quite like herself. Jack eyed her sharply, trying to make out whether she was as innocent as she looked. There was but one person to suspect, and that was the Silent One.

"Yes; and every one that was in the house, save yourself, seemed to have unanimously vacated. I might ask what has become of Sanchez if I thought you knew anything at all about the matter. I suppose he was with you shortly before your involuntary retirement?"

"Certainly; but, he would hardly dare—Sanchez is a strange being; but I do not fear to trust him."

"Your uncle, I understand?"

"Yes, though how you guessed it I cannot imagine. Few know of the relationship."

"Few save Roldan, myself, and several others. But that is nothing to the point. I came to warn Janvrin that there was danger for him here; that there were those who might seek to kill him, and that his daughter was scarcely safer, even here. I doubt if they have been carried away openly, and had I not found you I would have been searching below, long before this. There is a way out from the dungeons to the *barranca*, and it is possible that I may discover enough to guide me in the pursuit which should have been begun before this. If there are any hiding-places in the vaults you might point them out. Otherwise, I can make the search by myself. The absence of all your attendants is what has puzzled me. Sanchez hardly took them all away in a drove. You might look them up by way of keeping your mind employed. It will be rather lonesome sitting around here, alone."

"I begin to suspect that you know as much about the vaults as I do; and perhaps more. Otherwise you would surely have gone to your death when you plunged out of the window last night. I can show you nothing, and might be a clog on your movements, to say nothing of the fact that I can be looking about me here. The servants must have retired more precipitately than I bargained for, but unless I am greatly mistaken they are not far away, and I can find them should I once make up my mind that they are needed. For the present, it seems to me that it would be best to keep secret from them what has happened. Go, and luck go with you!"

It was plain that she was not anxious for him to linger; but whether she was sending him into a trap, or simply taking the first means at hand by which to rid herself of him, was more than the sport could guess. He thought once of trying to reinduce the mesmeric sleep from which he had awakened her, but with her mind in antagonism to his there was too much chance for failure. If she was his foe it was not safe to leave her behind him; yet he was not anxious for her presence, since she would only take his mind more or less off the business he had in hand. He knew the way well enough without her; and so feeling that he had allowed valuable moments to pass while he was talking, he left the room, and made his way to the hidden door in the main hallway.

Without much trouble he found the spring, and the lantern that was hidden behind the door.

Lighting the lantern he descended the steps, carefully examining as he went along in the hopes that he might discover a drop of blood or some little belongings of Janvrin or his daughter, which might have been dropped when they were being taken away.

But nothing of the kind did he discover; and the cells, which he found open, or at least unfastened, contained no inhabitants. The only thing that remained for him to do was to follow the secret passage until he came to the outlet into the *barranca*.

"Guido builded better than he knew when he showed me the secrets of the place. Last night I should have been in a bad way had

I not known a thing or two, that, perhaps, may be too much for the Donna herself. I don't like the journey through the *barranca* any too well, but there don't seem to be any help for it. Perhaps, though, they have not gone out. There may be hiding-places along the passage; and there is room in the gash in the ground to hide a regiment of soldiers. We will prospect a little, and if there is no float rock in view it will be time enough to sit down and think it all over. I do hate to go anywhere on foot, when a horse will take me there as well. If I could only get a glimpse of the trail, it would be a queer thing if I couldn't make out where it would wind up. And—that is the idea, now! If there is nothing to show to the contrary, what is the matter with Sanchez and his *cortege* starting out for the old mine. That's my point, anyhow. I can't waste too much time with the Janvrians. Of course, I wouldn't leave them in danger when they were in sight; but when it's a trail to follow, pard must come first of all. Limbs, do your duty. If we find nothing soon you will get horseflesh under you, before you are walked to death."

Although he looked narrowly at the walls of the passage that led from the cells to the *barranca*, and was certain that if there were any hiding-places, he would be able to at least see traces of their existence, he found nothing to reward his search, and he became almost satisfied that the Janvrians had been removed altogether from the neighborhood of the hacienda.

Once possessed of that idea, and he more than ever believed that the surest place to find them was at the mine; and though he did not like to give up the search for the trail until he had found some traces of the parties for whom he was looking, and had made up his mind as to exactly what had happened, he fell to thinking what course would be best for him to pursue. He had plenty of confidence in himself, but recognized the fact that he was one man against a dozen or more, and that strategy might be the safer way, rather than open warfare against such odds. He had been taking risks enough in venturing down into the vaults, where a lurker might have picked him off by the glow of his lantern, without giving him the semblance of a chance for his life. It would really seem folly to attempt a search of the *barranca*, though he knew from past experience that he would be able to find his way through it, and up to the plain, by the path he had already trodden.

There was, however, the bare possibility that he might learn something by so doing, and he determined to try it. He knew that a few hours later the moonlight would stream down into the chasm, so as to make it much easier to find his way; but for that he could not afford to wait; and as he believed that Sanchez had not lingered, he kept the lantern burning, and stepped out from the secret door of the passage, into the gloomy stillness of the canyon.

As he stepped he looked downward; and there, before him, he saw traces at last—a drop or two of fresh blood, upon the rock beneath his feet.

"There we have it; if we lose it now we ought to go broke and hang ourselves. Gives the whole thing away. Sanchez has been short-handed. If he had been backed by a strong force there would have been no need to do that knife act, back in the hacienda; and if there had been an extra man they would not have been compelled to lay the judge down while they looked after the closing of the door. There will be another drop or two near by, and that will give the clew complete. I must find it before I go very far from the spot."

He looked along the rocks toward the path by which the bottom of the gash was to be reached, but he found nothing. Over and over again he examined every foot of the way, but without result.

Then, as a last resort, he turned, and began the exploration of the further side, which as yet was to him unknown ground. It struck him that he had jumped rather hastily to a conclusion when he made up his mind that Sanchez would seek the plain by that one route. As there had been so much of a change in the programme why might he not have given up the meeting with Roldan altogether?

The wisdom of the move was apparent before he had gone a rod. The way was rougher, and his progress slow; but he found that for which he was searching. On the rocks again there was a drop or two of blood. It is barely possible that there had been a dozen that he did not see; but at all events he found the marks that showed in which direction the Don had taken his victim, and after that he imagined that it would be far plainer sailing.

"This is a new deal in the game that I don't altogether understand, and I guess I'll hold on to the lantern, whether it brings a shot at me or not. If it does I'll know I'm right, and can go ahead. But it's a mighty mean road that I am traveling, and if it don't grow better soon there will not be much progress made till the moon gets around my way. Then, I will have to hustle while it lasts."

Once having made up his mind to go ahead, regardless of who might be watching for him, and his progress was comparatively rapid, though toilsome enough for some distance.

Then, the ground began to improve, and before long he was going along quite at his ease. When, at last, he came to a little shelf, that looked like a stepping stone to a way which led upward, he examined it narrowly. It was on the right side of the canyon for one who wanted to reach the plain, and then head for the mine which Jack now had fixed as the ultimate goal; and from what little he could make out the sport was pretty sure that there was there a practicable path.

"No use to look for blood now; and the young lady either hasn't her wits about her, or they watch her too sharply for her to drop something to show how the trail runs. I believe I'll take the chances. If I find I am fooled it is not too far to hark back to the Golden Dream and pick up that same bit of horseflesh that no doubt is beginning to wonder where I have gone to. 'Nuf said. Up she rises!"

Once on the shelf and the further ascent offered no difficulty. Onward and upward he went, easily, but watching every step for a pitfall.

And then, just as the clear sky and the broad plain were before him, he heard a sound that was as much a growl as a moan, and looking in the direction of the spot from whence it seemed to proceed, he saw a human figure swinging from a jutting rock which overhung the abyss below.

CHAPTER XVII.

REACHING THE LINES.

How the person whom he saw in such deadly danger managed to maintain his hold was a sudden mystery that presented itself to the Gilt-Edge Sport. If he had known he would also have known whether there was scant time, or plenty of it, in which to rescue the victim of what was either a terrible accident, or a fiendish piece of cruelty.

He did not intend to thrust himself into danger by careless haste, though he sprung up the few steps that remained between him and the upper world, and then stooped low to make sure of his footing.

The way out was plain and sure, though to many a man it would have seemed dangerous enough. A huge boulder it was, with a sharp edge on either side, beyond which was the sheer descent; but with a narrow face that was almost as level as a floor. Little danger was there that his foot would slip if it was the same to the outermost extremity, and having taken in that much Jack stepped steadily out until he was at the verge and immediately above the swaying body of a man.

Then he could see that the fingers were clutched convulsively over the sharp angle of the rock, and clung there with a death-grip.

Only fingers that were of iron could have stood that strain, since they had nothing on which they could close, but supported the weight of the body below them by the strength which lay almost entirely in their tips.

"Hello, my friend!" exclaimed Jack, as he bent down immediately above.

"If you keep cool, and have the nerve, I think I can save you. If you go to splurging around it is most likely that we will both go over into the drink. I am going to run the chances and take hold of your wrist. Then you can try and shift your grip of one hand to my arm, and if you have any strength left perhaps you can scramble up while I brace myself with my other hand against a lucky little knob that is here. Ready?"

And as Jack lay down upon the rock he loosened the revolver at his hip. He did not intend to be made a victim after he had done all that lay in his power.

"Yes," came the muffled answer from below the rock; and at the same time he caught firmly the wrist that hung nearest to his right hand, and braced himself, as he had said, for a life and death struggle.

It was all over in a moment, and how it was done he could not have told. There must have been a reserve of strength which the owner of the clinging fingers had known better than to waste in useless effort before he was satisfied that the supreme moment had come. All that Atherton knew about it was that when he seized the wrist a hand caught his own; he pulled; the other struggled quietly, and then lay alongside of his preserver, breathing hard, and either unable or unwilling to move.

"A red-skin, by mighty!" exclaimed Jack, as he backed off of the rock, a trifle disgusted in spite of himself. Then he seated himself a few yards away, with his revolver between his knees, and awaited the result. He had little fear that the Indian would prove ungrateful, yet he had no great faith in the breed, and was ready for the worst.

After a little the Indian arose slowly, and moved toward Jack with a dignified tread that showed him to be a warrior of some importance.

"Shake!" he said grimly, extending his hand. "Talking Feather owes one debt to a white man."

"Shake goes, old fellow; with the reservation that if I find you were up to any devilment when you got yourself into such a pretty predicament, I may take a notion to put you back

where I found you, and leave you there for good. How in the name of wrath did you get there, anyhow?"

The Indian had spoken fair English, though his tones were measured, and the sport had little doubt that he would understand him if he replied in the same tongue, though it seemed strange enough that the red-skin should have a command of that language.

"Talking Feather came face to face with the demon of the Ranch Accursed, and he was off his guard. They flung him yonder, and thought that he had gone down into the *barranca*. Then he hung there, since he could do no better. But for the white friend who came to his aid, he would have hung there an hour or so, and then dropped."

"I think I see a light. And what was the aforesaid demon doing around here, this time of night?"

"The thing that has made the ranch accursed. Another victim—two."

"Talking Feather, you are a brick! Now, tell me which way the cutfit went, and I will call it square, unless you claim that I am still your debtor. They are my mutton, but they got out of the corral, and have led me a pretty chase. Pity that I had not been here in time to take a hand in. Perhaps some one else would have gone over the rocks."

"Talking Feather can show which way they went, but it is vain to follow them by night. They are far before, and will ride hard. There is no haste. The moon has passed its full, and till it grows again, the lamb is safe."

"I think I continue to understand; but how about the lamb's father? There should have been an old gentleman in the lay-out; and I have something of an interest in him. Will they take him along?"

"They had bit into him deeply; but now they carry him with care. For a while his life is safe. Yet, if they take him into the mine of the Golden Dream, he may never see the sunlight again. There are prisons there, that can hold a man till he dies."

"Provided he has no friend to see him out. Thanks! I think I know where the mine is; and I know I can strike the neighborhood, since I have done a little labor thereabouts on my own hook. I shall appoint myself a committee of one to investigate. I left my mustang the other side of the ranch, and it's too late to go back for him. I shall try it on foot, and if you can give me any directions for reaching the place from here, it may help me out a trifle. I am not sure that I have my bearings, though I know the general direction well enough."

"There is no haste. Come with the Talking Feather. He will take thee to his lodge and tell thee a thing or two worth the knowing. Then, if it seems good to run the risks, he will open the way to the Golden Dream, so that his brother can see something of its dangers before he begins the fight. Why should he lose his life and do nothing?"

"Very true, most noble red-man; and if you have any information to offer that you will guarantee to be of good, I am ready to go a mile or so out of my way and wait till morning before I set out on what may very well be a trail of death. I suspect I have a pard somewhere among those prison cells that you speak of, and you can be sure that I won't leave him there. But I must say that you are about the strangest article of the aboriginal that I ever came across. You talk like a book."

"Because Talking Feather has learned to read the books of his white brothers. It was for that they gave him his name. Before that, they called him The Bear with the Strong Claws. But, come! There are some things to say; but not here."

"All right; I am coming. And it strikes me that either name suits you. You have the grip of a bear, sure enough; and you can talk with the best of us."

Talking Feather uttered an unmusical "Ugh!" the most distinctively Indian thing he had done since the conversation had begun, and then led the way along the edge of the *barranca* for perhaps a mile, when he turned aside into a shallow canyon, which, however, grew in size as they advanced. Altogether, it was quite a tramp they took before the Indian halted.

As might be predicated from his late wonderful feat of endurance, Talking Feather was a man of splendid physique; yet his face had the look of the student rather than the athlete. When Atherton looked him over by firelight he was well satisfied with the friend he had made, and ceased to wonder at the strangely correct way in which he spoke. He did not fear to trust the Indian with his plans; and listened to the hints that were given in return with attention. They continued their conversation for some time after they had come to the camp, and when Jack again announced his intention of entering the mine, Talking Feather was silent for a little, revolving in his mind the situation.

"My brother must go; but let him go with caution. There need be no haste. In these mines, for there are more than one of them, some of my people work. They have forgotten that they are the children of the forest and plain, and that it is for them to live as free as

the air. They have chosen to put their necks under the heels of the Mexicans as their masters, and have become as slaves. If my brother understands the Spanish, what is to stop him that he puts on the paint and clothing of the despised red-man? Talking Feather will give him a charm so that his red brethren will not betray him, and the white men need never suspect. He will have to labor, and perhaps like a slave; but what of that, so it lasts but a day or so? Then he can find out the secrets of the shafts, and when the time comes he may strike and not miss his prey. And if he chooses he can make friends of those who carry the same totem as the Talking Feather, so that when he needs them they will die for him rather than give him up, or fail to follow where he asks them to go. How does that seem?"

"Good enough. Make up your disguise, and if you help me through this ripple I will promise never to pull on another red-man unless I can swear to it that he is a horse-thief. This time it is Gilt-Edge Jack who says, shake."

The two men shook hands gravely, and with but little more conversation retired to their slumbers. One night in the Donna's best bed-chamber and the next in the lodge of a half-civilized Indian—to the Gilt-Edge Sport it made but little difference where he rested. His slumbers were always sweet; and the approach of danger always awakened him.

Talking Feather was in sober earnest in what he had said in regard to the disguise; and when morning came he prepared it, and arrayed Jack in such a style that even Donna Eleena would never have recognized him. Then, with more cautions, and some further directions, he saw his guest depart on his way to the mines of the Golden Dream.

There was a long distance to travel, and Talking Feather had furnished the sport with a pony which would take him over the ground almost as rapidly as his own larger mustang would have done. When near the mines the pony was to be turned loose, to find its way back, and Atherton could then finish his journey on foot, arriving at the mines toward sundown.

Quite a presentable warrior would Gilt-Edge Jack have made if he had been trimmed out for the war-path; but that was not the idea of Talking Feather, who gathered together a costume that showed the Indian all over, but the Indian of the lower, groveling class, who had been tamed by hunger and almost devoured by laziness. He might easily be mistaken for a half-breed who had hung around some frontier town, or some settlement in the neighborhood of the residence of a wealthy Don, whence he had been compelled to flee for a crime, and desired to bury himself beyond the reach of pursuit.

For such a one what spot would be considered safer than the depths of a mine? And the fact of his being a criminal would count but little against his getting the work for which he was going to apply. While he remained he would be looked at and treated as a slave, and would be hardly able to shirk work so much as not to earn the scanty board and wages that he would receive.

The day wore on and the tireless pony carried him on toward his destination. Along the way he met with no living creature; and saw but few at a distance. He cared little, of course, if he was met or seen. It was no strange thing for a fugitive to steal a pony, ride it till it was of no further use, and then turn it adrift. His explanation, which was to be more hint than straight statement, was ready to his tongue; and he would have considered himself lucky if he had fallen in with Roldan and his rovers, or even a detachment of the latter. It might save him trouble and danger in approaching the little valley where he expected to find the outlaw miner and his men.

It was near sundown when he dismounted, removed the thong bridle from his somewhat jaded steed, and tucked under his arm the coarse blanket which had served him in place of a saddle. Some miles back they had passed near to indications of water, and he was not surprised to see the pony kick up its heels, roll over and over, and then start on the back track without hesitation. Then, he went along a narrow and gloomy little gorge, that he knew would lead him to the neighborhood of the camp. He had passed by the mouth of this same gorge not many days before; but he did not then know the neighborhood he might have found at the other end.

Before he had gone very far there was a sudden challenge.

"*Espere un poco! Adonde va?*"

It was not a military salute, nor was it such an order as called for immediate response at the risk of life. Very smoothly was the order given, to halt a little; and very easy was the tongue that asked him where he was going; but Jack knew that there was business behind it all, and stopped as though he had been shot.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FRIEND AND A FOE.

THE first step was taken, and the Gilt-Edge Sport was too far committed to his scheme to draw back, except at the risk of bloodshed. As

he had expected, he had been stopped by an outlying post of the rovers, and his presence there would have to be explained.

As he halted he looked around him apprehensively, and as though it was half in his mind to flee; but the same voice, still speaking in Spanish, ordered him to advance a little, but with his hands up.

He swung up his hands awkwardly, and stepped toward the voice, which proved to belong to a rather pleasant-faced villain, with a leveled carbine, who had been partially concealed by some bushes that grew at the side of the trail. He had two companions with him, and they had been busily engaged in conversation or they would doubtless have noticed his coming sooner. He made a motion to the prisoner to halt, when he was a few yards distant, and Jack obeyed, staring sullenly at the outlaw. The latter asked a few questions, speaking lazily, but with the air of a man who expected to be answered.

The responses, though ambiguously worded, appeared to be intelligible enough, and stripped of their verbiage amounted to this. His name was Pedro and he had had trouble where he was working, so that he had to run away. He was tired of wandering and starvation, and had been told by an Indian whom he met that there would be work and wages for him in certain mines to which he gave him directions. That was the reason he was there. He had worked in his time, and could use a pick and shovel as well as any man of his size. If he was wanted there they might take him in. If they did not it would not make much difference to him. He would wander on further South.

"The customary trouble where there is a woman and two men with knives," laughed the listener.

"It is true that there is some mining done over yonder, and that the original sons of the soil are doing the heaviest part of the work. The number is never full, and without doubt there will be both food and wages to be had for the asking. But, remember that those who begin to work there cannot come and go as they please; but must stay for a good, round year. It will matter not who is searching for them; if they once get under those hills they will never be found. You seem like a sorry sort of a fellow, yet I give thee this warning. Think well if it be not best to forget we have met, and for thee to turn around and go back? No! Well, so let it be. Tomasso, take him along. He will have the work that he is anxious for, though the wages will be another thing."

"An honest sort of a bandit," thought Jack, as he followed Tomasso.

"He gave me fair warning and I hope that one day I may be able to do as much for him. I would hate to have to drop him without letting him know the sort of man Pedro really is."

Such reflections were all very well as showing that the sport was by no means discouraged over the outlook; but before he had followed Tomasso far he commenced to realize that if this was the only way of approach to the mines—and he believed that it was—he might have more trouble to get out than he had counted on. It was some miles to the spot where he and the Daisy had been prospecting, and the surroundings here were totally different.

As they went along it grew darker, and he could see less and less clearly what lay to the sides. By the time that the two had passed several men who appeared to be guards, and had entered the mine, he could only guess whither Tomasso was leading him, though the latter advanced without hesitation, so well was he acquainted with the ins and outs of the path.

Just within the mouth of the mine there was an apartment that did duty as a guard room and into that he was ushered, to find himself in the presence of Sanchez himself, and a man whom he took to be Roldan, though his back was toward him, and the two were conversing in an undertone.

Tomasso looked about him as though searching for some one who was not there, and saluted Roldan with ceremony when that worthy turned with an impatient ejaculation:

"A recruit," he said, pointing toward the fictitious Pedro.

"He came across the outpost, and asked to be brought hither, since he was in search of work and wages. He was promised both, and I was sent to bring him to Rafael."

"Rafael is below; take him there and have him put to work in the morning. He looks like a villain who would shirk work. If he tries it here he will take the whip. If he does his full share he will be paid the better."

"Wait a little," said Sanchez, softly. "He looks familiar. Perhaps it is one of the rascals from—"

Roldan interrupted with a warning glance and a hasty question before the name of the Golden Dream was mentioned. If there was to be any conversation he preferred to manage it; and he did not wish names mentioned that might be remembered hereafter.

Of course that suited Jack, for it gave him something of a start to hear Sanchez say that his form was familiar. He had not bargained on passing the inspection of his sharp eyes. He gave

the same sketch of his past that he had given at the outpost, and it appeared to satisfy both men. They turned from him, and he was led away by the waiting Tomasso.

By the light of the torch which his guide was carrying, Atherton could see that he was in an old mine, much like the one from which he and the Daisy had so summarily departed. All this tunneling had never been done at the dictation of Roldan and his rovers, since it was the work of years. When they had followed the drift for some distance they descended a shaft of a few yards in depth, which brought them to another level. As he stepped from the ladder, Jack could hear the hum of many voices, and knew that he was approaching Rafael and the men who were to be his fellow workers.

A dull glow in the darkness showed where a door opened into the large room in which they were assembled, and as he stepped into the apartment he was almost stunned by the babel around him.

Where half a hundred men were talking in a language of which Jack scarcely understood a word, it was not strange that he should think confusion was worse confounded, though to those accustomed to it, it simply seemed to be the jabbering of a lot of men who were little more than infants in mind, and whose talk was not worth the listening to, even if it could be understood.

At one end of the room, on something that resembled a cot, Rafael reclined by himself. He was the overseer of the workers, and his post was not altogether a sinecure. He looked after them even in their hours of rest; though, when the time came for slumber the stout door was locked and the men were left to their own devices.

"Another back for thy whip," said Tomasso approaching him.

"The Don sends him to thee with his compliments. Turn him in with the rest and see that he shirks not work. I suspect that he is both tired and hungry, and it would be well to look that he has his chance to-night if he is to do a day's work to-morrow."

Rafael nodded. In his way he was more silent than even Sanchez. He looked over the glowering face of the fictitious Pedro, shook his head as though he was not particularly well pleased with the looks of the new workman, and then motioned toward the table at which were the greater part of the men in the room.

The permission was enough. Jack had not dined very heartily, and had not supped at all. He slouched up to the table, and fell to on the provisions, which seemed to consist chiefly of red pepper. As he was acquainted with that peculiarity of Mexican cookery he underwent no surprise with the first mouthful, and eat so ravenously as to win the approbation of his neighbors, one of whom spoke to him, though he could only guess at the meaning of the words. He answered in a broken patois that had Spanish as a foundation; and then there was a surprise for both of them.

"Rags cannot deceive Guido. Thou art the man who helped me to escape from the vaults under the Ranch Accursed. Fear nothing because thou hast been recognized, for Guido is thy friend. And for thee to come here is to put thyself where thou wilt need friends. The herd here is worse than the robber gang above. It is a word and a knife for the stranger if he be worth the robbing. Look out for them, for they will try thy skill with the blade before the night is over. Rafael holds them with his eye, but when that is away they are fiends."

"Seems to me that you have made quick time to get here and broken into the ways of the place. If I hadn't as quick an ear for voices as you I should swear that you were a fraud. But after the little favor I did you I do not think that you would betray me, and so have no objections to confiding in you. I own up, this is a little more than I bargained for, but I am in the swim and won't throw up my hands till I get to the end of the rope. Perhaps you can help me. I don't care for this riff-raff, and didn't expect to have to herd with them. What I am after is to find out whether Roldan has any prisoners hereabouts, and if he has, to get at them."

"Thou art a prisoner thyself, and the chances a hundred to one for thee never to go out alive, unless Guido comes to thy aid."

"As he will."

"If he can."

"As he can, if he will. But I am not yet asking for that aid, unless you can tell me more of the ways of the place. By the way, did you ever meet a red-skin by the name of Talking Feather?"

"Truly have I; and a dozen of the men near to thee could answer the same way."

"Then, perhaps I won't have to fight my battles altogether alone," said Jack, making the sign that the chief had taught him. "He said that his friends should be my friends, and that I would find some of them here."

"And he told thee truly. Make but that sign to the right men and the rest will have to get at thee over their dead bodies. Wait a little and watch. It will not be hard to see who are

the friends of the Feather who Talks. I must not be seen talking to thee too much. Keep a bold face on, and if they try to murder thee, Guido will be at thy side, and a dozen more who will recognize that sign."

Already some of the men were looking askance at him, and were only restrained from speaking with him after their own fashion by the presence of Rafael. It was the part of wisdom to heed the warning, and to study the ground. Even a man like Gilt-Edge Johnny might be overmatched by a gang of such ruffians as were these.

He noticed that there was a great difference in the faces of the men by whom he was surrounded. Some were sullen and hard-looking. Others were toilers without hope. Some were pure Indians, some peons who had run away from their masters, while others were Indians, to be sure, but of the same tribe as the Talking Feather, and possessed of intelligence somewhat resembling that of the chief.

To some of the latter he made, from time to time, a secret signal, and every time it was answered with a promptness which showed that the man who used it could expect their support.

Guido had glided away from his side after the close of the conversation, and had not been seen again. He looked after him, and more than half wished that he had the support of such a cold-blooded individual.

The supper over the most of the men began to gamble for small stakes, so that he had abundant opportunity to look over his companions at his leisure. At least an hour passed by, in which he saw nothing of Guido.

Then, his mentor and friend once more appeared, just as Rafael, with a yawn, straightened himself up, and swaggered out of the room. The door closed behind him; there was the sound of shooting bolts; and Gilt-Edge Johnny was locked in with the tigers.

The departure of the overseer was evidently the signal for which more than one of the gang had been waiting. There was a perceptible hush, though no man made a movement until it should seem certain that the leave-taking was final.

This gave Guido time to come around to the side of the sport.

"Be on thy guard. There are some here who mistrust thy disguise. If thou art looked upon as a spy or traitor they will try to make it go hard with thee. See. The man with the one eye is Pablo, and the leader of the workers. He will have a word or two to say to thee. Unless it be part of thy plan to have a fight where the odds against thee means death, answer him fair, and try to make him thy friend. He may smile, yet be thinking to cut thy throat; or he may frown, and yet have taken a liking to thee. Either as friend or foe, trust him not."

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"You would not understand the legend if I said that poor Trust was dead, and that bad pay killed him. I am trusting no man save John Atherton; and he will do to tie to, every time. Keep away, now; or you may strike a snag in the general wreck."

He spoke hastily, and with his eyes toward the man with the one eye, yet he saw that Guido had not heeded the advice. Then he was all attention for the burly ruffian who was gliding toward him, with a long knife resting back against his sleeve. If there was to be war it was just at hand.

CHAPTER XIX.

WAR TO THE KNIFE.

JACK thought it fortunate that his questioning was to be done by a man who was evidently a full-blooded Mexican. He could talk to him in a lingo that both could understand; but had he been tested by an Indian there would have been little hope of being able to keep up his disguise. He knew nothing of the language that ought to be his mother tongue, and unless the signs given him by Talking Feather were enough to carry him through he could not impose for an instant upon one of the tribe.

Silently a ring was formed, with all faces turned toward him, and gradually drawing nearer as the man of the one eye lessened the distance between himself and the object of his attention. When a yard or two away he halted and gazed into the face of the Gilt-Edge Sport as though reading him through and through. Then after a pause, he turned to his comrades.

"It is as I told thee. He is no true man, but a spy and a traitor. What shall be done?"

"Death! death!" shouted two-score voices. The other ten were ominously silent.

"No spy am I, since there is nothing to spy for. No traitor, since I am pledged to no man, save to work, eat, and draw wages. If it will be diversion to see me die, begin the work. Had I not killed a man I had not been here. I can kill another—or a dozen. Pedro guards his life with his hand wherever he goes."

Out from its hiding-place beneath his clothes flashed a knife every whit as long as that of Pablo, and the fictitious Pedro stood poised in an easy attitude of defense.

The defiance was a surprise, and the manner of it somewhat in his favor. The moment the knife came into his hand, the stranger changed

from a timid, shrinking-looking Indian to a fearless warrior, with the unmistakable light of battle in his face. Pablo knew, for though a bully, he had met men enough in his time to understand that there are some on whom the prospect of a fight to the death works just such a change.

He was not disconcerted, but a little amused. He should be able to crush the intruder with a single blow of his fist; and as for a fight with knives—he was the champion of the mine at that diversion. And besides him, there were very good men there, with *machete* and *stiletto*.

"Ha, ha! The red chicken crows loudly, but it is because he thinks that the men who send him here will save him from harm. We know the game, since there was fair warning that it was to be played. Is our number not full without thee, and what need is there of another man? Thou art to listen to our talk, so that there may be some excuse for Rafael to come among us with his whip. Perhaps he would find out who there is here who would love to take his life. If he ever asks thee, tell him that there is not a man here who would not dearly love to drive a blade to his heart, and that there are—some—who will one day try to do it. But that time is not at hand yet, and when it comes thou wilt not be living to take note of it. Is it not so, brothers?"

He turned to the circle that had halted a few paces to his rear, and the answer from the forty who trained to his bidding was a low, hollow groan.

Atherton was not exactly dismayed, but it struck him at that moment that if he had known the state of affairs at the mine he would have thought twice before running himself into danger. Evidently, there was a conspiracy of some kind among the workers; and having once so openly admitted its existence, it was not likely that they intended he should ever have the opportunity to reveal it to the outlaw chief and his followers.

Still, the sport was not the man to shrink from danger that he had courted, because he found it more pronounced than he expected. Just as boldly as before he answered:

"It may be true, most illustrious Pablo, that I live not much longer; but crowd me and there shall be more bodies than one for the same hole. I know nothing of Rafael and his whip, and I care less. If I feel that whip, he feels this knife. I had trouble to the North, and fled to the mines. It may be death to go out, so I stay here. I can be a good comrade or an evil foe. Choose which thou wouldst rather have me. If there be any honor here, not more than a dozen will ask to face me at the same time. If less than that, so much the better for Pedro. Set up thy man, and if I cut not his knife out of his hand without touching his life, slay me. If I do, take me as a brother."

"Pablo is the man who speaks with the strangers, and he is going to speak with thee. Not with a blade in his fist, but with these two hands will he strangle thee in spite of thy knife. Be on thy guard. He is coming."

There was some honor about the man of the one eye. He gave fair notice of his intention, and even hesitated a moment after casting down his knife. Then, with his one eye fairly blazing, he crept slowly toward his intended victim.

To the surprise of every one the stranger threw away what looked like his last chance for life. As Pablo's blade clattered to the floor the knife of Pedro clanged down beside it. Guido, who was watching every move with intense interest, shrugged his shoulders, and the half-score of Indians who had recognized the sign without knowing the man, looked grave, and hastily thrust their own knives away.

But Jack knew what he was about. He did not care to come to a close with Pablo, for he could understand that there was danger in those long, steel-muscled arms and talon-like fingers; but he had no objections to trying conclusions at long range, and he thought that he could keep his man at a distance. He shifted gracefully into a boxing position, threw up his hands, lowered his head, and as Pablo came within distance slung out his left with all of the vicious force for which he was renowned.

Pablo had no idea of guard and parry. He had intended to creep up within distance and then hurl himself upon his man, and crush him to the floor. He hardly knew that the blow was coming, just too soon for his spring; but he dodged his head by instinct, and the knuckles of iron landed high up on the forehead.

Unless a man is left-handed by nature it is his right that generally gives the finishing stroke early in the game. The sport hit hard, and his knuckles cut to the bone; but Pablo only staggered back, a little dazed at the rough nature of the check he had received, but not seriously hurt. He could stand a dozen such blows and then win without being hard pushed. It cut into his pride a little; but he had no idea of calling on his friends for assistance, or even allowing them to take a hand in the game.

"Keep back! Keep back. The man who interferes settles with Pablo when this is done. He is my game, and if I slay him not with these hands turn him out and let him go."

His fierce words drove back the crowd that

was pressing forward as effectually as would the lash of Rafael's whip. The ring was complete, and in Jack's corner stood Guido, looking on with more interest than ever, and a determination to protect the sport in the rear.

Pablo had aided the sport in more ways than he knew. When he shouted to his friends to keep back it was done so fiercely that they withdrew a few paces, thus enlarging the ring, which was all that Gilt-Edge Johnny asked. He had room to shift a little, and by skillful dodging avoid the hurricane rush that he knew was coming. When Pablo lunged forward the smaller man was under his arm, and away before he knew that he was wasting his strength on the air. A mocking laugh at his back caused him to wheel; and as he came around Jack stepped in and let go left and right upon the unprotected face.

This time he reached the spots that he was aiming for. His left caught Pablo under the eye; his right landed on the brow above it. Then he stepped back smiling. The longer the battle lasted after that the more certain he was of winning.

"If I know anything about the early closing movement, that eye of yours will have the shutters up and barred before many minutes; and meantime, if you can judge of a distance within a foot and a half I am away off my base. For the present I must keep you encouraged with a few little ones, just to make you think I am losing my steam. Then, if you still keep ugly you will have the *coup de grace*."

So thought the sport, as he shifted about, weaving his arms in and out, and ready to pop in a little one whenever a tempting opening might be offered.

Pablo was no fool, though he was not posted in the royal art of self-defense. The pain of the cuts gave him no trouble, but scarcely had he received them when he knew what would follow. He had but the one eye; and in a few minutes that would be swelled shut. If he had not flung away his knife he would have tried his best to use it now; but pride held him from calling on his men for aid, or to furnish him with a weapon. If he could once get his arms around the Indian he could crush him; and it seemed hardly possible that he should fail in doing that, provided he took some hard punishment as he rushed within his guard. He believed that Jack had struck as hard as he knew how; and to win the victory he would be willing to take half a dozen such blows. It was too late now to win without a scratch, and he did not care how hard he was hit if he could only get this mocking little fiend in the fingers that should tear his windpipe from his throat.

Something like this he howled as he made a last wicked rush; and there were certain ominous signs that made Jack believe that if the battle went on much longer he would have more than Pablo to fight. There was no hope for compromise while Pablo was in this humor; and if he was to look after the rest of the gang it could be all the easier done if their leader was out of the road.

Reconsidering, then, his intention of making a waiting fight, Jack steadied himself, measured the distance and the rate at which Pablo was coming, and struck with his right hand, letting the full weight of his body, assisted by the spring of his right knee, go along with it.

The result was terrific to these men who had never before seen a man scientifically beaten, and who did not know that it could be so easily and quietly done. Pablo went down as if shot, and lay motionless as though dead.

"Was it fairly fought?" Johnny asked, as he turned toward the excited throng.

"Pablo was the champion, and Pablo will not say yes or no for the next ten minutes. Then he will be no worse, save that he will have to wait for his eye to open. What about Pedro? Is he spy, or a true man?"

"Thou hast won fairly enough, but this is no place for thee to stay. Go now, while the way is open, and come not near again, or the knife may do what the hands of Pablo could not."

One of the Mexicans, who seemed to be spokesman after Pablo, stepped forward, waving his hand to the rest to enjoin silence.

"But the way is not clear, since the door is bolted, and Rafael might object to open. Nor do I care to depart. I came to work and not to play."

"It was the wish of Pablo that thou shouldst have leave to depart if he was the beaten man. Thou hast had thy chance. There are more doors than one, as we tell thee, whether spy or not; and if it is thy wish to go, go now. The choice may not be open again. Spy or not, there is no room for thee here."

"Go now," whispered Guido at his back. "Even if thou shouldst slay a dozen, what profit would there be? Another moment and they will all be upon thee."

"Good counsel," retorted the sport in an undertone; "but I came to learn something of two prisoners of the vampire, who must be here. I can bluff this set, I think; and I don't draw back when I have once started in a game. Let them come. If I turned aside now they would slay me in the dark—or else I am in no danger if I remain."

"In danger thou art, for they are coming." And as Guido spoke the forty knives were flashing as if with one accord; and the two-score were closing in on the two.

CHAPTER XX.

LED BY THE HAND OF A WOMAN.

DURING the brief respite Guido had thoughtfully picked from the floor the knife which Jack had cast away when the affair with Pablo had just begun. This he pressed into the hand of the sport as he spoke, and then silently ranged himself alongside. He uttered no defiance, but he showed plainly enough by his action that he intended to make the cause of the stranger his own.

"In case we get the worst of it is there a way of retreat?" asked Jack, hastily, as he braced himself for the coming shock.

Guido seemed to know something of the intricacies of the place, and it was as well to know whether there was a dernier resort in case the battle was going against them.

"Yes; but unless reached in the darkness, it might be as dangerous as to stay here. They can follow and kill."

"Darkness it is!" was the quick answer; and as Atherton spoke his hands filled with revolvers.

After all, he was not anxious to remain and be backed to pieces. He had hoped to bluff the party in the outset, and win them over afterward. He knew that there were ten men there who would maintain a friendly neutrality, if they did not actually espouse his cause; and had he been given a little time he might have succeeded in convincing the rest that it would be better not to force him to extremities. When he found that wholesale slaughter was the only thing that could avail him if he remained, it did not take an instant to make up his mind as to his course. First with one hand and then with the other he aimed at the lights, that swung high on a four-armed candelabra.

All this was done like a flash—the movement of the men—the question to Guido, and his answer—the rapid shots which plunged the place in darkness. Yet it would not have been possible to have finished the work in time had it not been that the production of the revolvers had checked the rush, the leaders shrinking back before the weapons, and so holding those who were in the rear.

"Now, Guido, if you know your business, get in the fine work. If you don't—the bridges are gone, and the last chance for a winning fight went with them."

Guido gave no answer. As Jack, in the excitement of the moment had spoken in pure American, perhaps he would not have understood even if he had heard.

But Guido heard not, because, at that moment, he was lying almost senseless on the floor, with the life bubbling out in a fairly rapid stream.

Instead, a soft hand was thrust into that of the sport, and a voice that sounded strangely familiar, whispered into his ear:

"Come!"

He felt the hand drawing him away, and followed without hesitation. He was surprised; but his plight could be made no worse, and if harm had been intended it would have come without warning. Probably Guido meant to take care of himself, and if he was not there it was useless to wait for him. He retained his hold on the hand, and suffered himself to be guided away from the spot where he had been standing.

For a moment he could hear the raging crowd shouting in the darkness. Then, his conductor said, "Stoop," and having stooped, and gone a pace or two in his crouching posture, the sound was suddenly cut off, as though a heavy door had been closed behind them.

"The scum have learned a little of the mystery of the old drift; but there are other secrets that I think they will have to wait a while to find out. There is little danger of pursuit; and if they followed, a nimble foot and a brave heart could give them the slip. It is dark, but have no fear that I know not the road."

The voice was the voice of a woman, and was soft and sweet. Jack thought he had heard it more than once; and believed that it belonged to Eleena. How she had come there he knew not. Probably she had made no delay, but started at once when he parted from her at the hacienda. If he had gone back when he thought of doing it, as he went down into the darkness of the *baranca*, he would not have found her. He was satisfied now, more than ever, that she was another party to the contract which he had overheard Sanchez making with the rover.

But there was already evidence that she had no immediate designs against him; and this action was no surprise. If Sanchez and Roldan had recognized him, and sent him down among the thugs he had just left behind, to receive his death, Eleena, too, might have recognized him, and come to save him in a way that would not bring her in direct conflict with her allies.

Though this seemed to him to be the explanation, he did not think it best to allow the conclusion at which he had arrived to appear.

With a shrug of the shoulders which might have been felt by his guide, he answered:

"A blessed thing it is that there is some one to know the way. Of course, I could have made it sultry there as long as the cartridges lasted, and I had a hand left to shake a knife; but in the long run I suppose I should have had to go under."

"More fool you," answered the voice, with an angry little ring in it, that the Gilt-Edge Sport recognized, carefully as the other tried to disguise it.

"I heard what you said to that man who stood by your side, when he offered to secure your retreat. You could do them no good by remaining yet you refused to go until you knew something more in regard to their fate. Who are, or were, these same two prisoners? They must be old and dear friends for you to have run such a fearful risk on such a flimsy-appearing principle."

"Not particularly old, or near friends. I never saw them before a few nights ago, and if they were in safety I do not know that I would care to see them again. But they are Americans; and one of them is a woman. That ought to be reason enough why I should not desert them."

"A woman! Ah! There is always a woman behind every reason. And what is this woman to you?"

"Nothing at all but an average female—but, as such, she is to be protected, if it does cost a little blood, or bring a worthless vagabond like myself into some danger."

"An average woman! Do you mean to say that you would do as much for the next female that you met, regardless of age or looks?"

"If you added sex to the other qualifications, it would be about as sensible as the rest. Circumstances alter cases. I might not take hold so freely, and if there was unfinished business already on hand, I might close my eye and pass on. But if I was free to act, and once took a hand in the game, you can bet that I would never let go till we had passed the ripple, or the last horn had blown."

"I am not sure that I altogether understand you, but if there is such pleasure in knight-errantry, why not protect me? I have done one or two things already for you that might give me a claim on your gratitude, and I can give you the assurance that I need the protection as much as does the female for whom you were but just speaking."

"You speak in riddles. After having put myself in your hands as my only hope, you must want to send me down into the doldrums when you ask my protection. I may as well stop right now, and paddle my own canoe."

Suiting the action to the word he suddenly dropped the hand that had all along been resting in his, and stepped aside a pace. In the darkness neither could see the other, and as long as both kept silent there was not much likelihood of their coming together again.

The movement was made by the sport without the least premeditation, and if his guide abandoned him to his fate his situation was dangerous enough. They had been advancing but slowly, and there was no sign that they were reaching the end of the shaft through which they were passing. There was no certainty, even, that it was a shaft, for Jack had noticed that as they passed along he had only felt the rocky wall to the one side. They might be in a cave of ever so great an extent, for all that he knew.

For several minutes there followed utter silence. Atherton was sure that his ears would be sharp enough to detect any motion that the unseen woman might make, lightly as she stepped; and while he did not intend that she should find him again, even if she searched for him, he believed that he could follow her, no matter in which direction she might turn, and thus, perhaps, be led to safety.

But, unless his ears greatly deceived him, no motion was there made, and while he bent forward, almost holding his breath, he could imagine that he saw Eleena, in all her young beauty, standing before him, with the same strained look upon her own face as she turned to this side and that, uncertain which way he had gone.

The stillness was broken by the very faintest of sounds; but it was enough to throw the sport on his guard. He straightened himself, smoothed the look of rapt attention out of his face, and was standing his own careless self when the glare of a dark-lantern flashed upon the darkness, and almost instantaneously centered on his face.

"You are there, are you, old truepenny? If I had not believed that I would have heard the noise of the scrambling fall, I might have thought you had rolled yourself into that gash at the other side of you. See! I will flash the light in that direction, and you can get a glimpse of what you have just missed. Better be content with well enough; for, unless you know this passage better than I think you do, there is more than one danger for your unwary feet to drop into. What possessed you to take such a senseless freak?"

"Not as senseless as you may think. I prefer

to get out of the way of temptation, and trust that my good luck will protect me from the other evils. I can fight them, don't you see, but I am not so sure how it would come out if I let things go so far that I had to be at war with myself."

"Am I so great a temptation, then?" asked the voice, and Jack could imagine the winning smile was on the fair face that he could not see.

"Not at a distance. I think I have as much will power as the next one, and when that hand is no longer on mine there is no danger that I will forget that I have a little duty to perform before I can undertake any other adventure. I think that if there is a lady in the land who can protect herself her name is the same as yours."

"Are you so sure of that? You speak as though you fancied you knew me, but I can assure you that we have never met before, and that were we placed face to face you would not recognize me."

"Are you so sure of that?" asked the sport, repeating the question.

"You may try to disguise your voice, but I know it too well. How you came to be here I need not try to guess. If we cannot be friends I would prefer that we should not become foes, if it can be so."

"You are certain? Well then, look and see if there is any thing familiar in the face that you can see before you."

She turned the lantern so that the light fell on her head, and revealed the lineaments of an utter stranger.

It was only a glimpse, for hardly had the light made the revelation when it flashed again to himself.

"The mystery deepens," he thought, though his lips uttered no sound.

"It is not Eleena, and upon my soul I believe the face is more beautiful than hers. Who can she be? Perhaps if I had seen first I would not have been so ready to tell her to look out for herself. What next, I wonder?"

Enough of this folly," said the lady, her voice sounding strangely stern after that fitting view.

"I told you the truth when I said that I had need of you. I can add that no service ever done me will pass unrepaid. I can put wealth that is practically boundless into your hands, and almost insure you a long life of happiness. I can bid high, you perceive; and could prove to you that I can fulfill every promise. Answer me not again for the present. To save you from the fiends you have lately left behind I must treat you with some harshness, perhaps, but I have no fear that it will break your magnificent nerve; and when I come again you can be ready with your answer. If you will go forward half a dozen paces you will find a lamp that is already lighted, and by turning its flame up you can see how to avoid the pitfall into which you might plunge if you tried to wander about here in the dark. It is no disgrace to be wise, and I advise you to secure the light while you have the chance to do it in safety."

She turned the line of her light slightly, showing him the marks of a path that looked as though it had been often trodden; and he could see that it led straight to a swinging door. He noted the direction, but made no movement. He would have spoken, but before his lips could open the light vanished, and he stood alone in the darkness, by the side of the pitfall, and it seemed to him that he could hear the swish of feminine garments waxing fainter and fainter as they vanished over the path by which he had come.

CHAPTER XXI.

CAUGHT AND CAGED.

"PRIDE killed himself trying to rise by tugging at his own boot-straps. I may have fallen heir to his mantle, but I know when to stop the lift."

The Gilt Edge Sport stood there for some time, half expecting that if he made a motion, the light would be turned on again, and he would be caught in the act. The lady might have departed; but then, the possibility of her being near made him hesitate to chance being found in the timid attitude he knew he would assume if he attempted to make his way forward in the dark.

If his late companion had been old and ugly, it is more than likely he would not have cared a particle, so that he left the spot.

But after a little, he came to the sage conclusion already recorded, and carefully taking his bearings by the memory of what he had seen during that momentary flash, he advanced toward the door of which he had been granted a glimpse.

He made no mistake, either. When he reached out his hand, it fell upon the stone casement, and he could see a faint spark of light in the midst of the gloom beyond.

If his guide had meant harm, she could have disposed of him at any time during their journey in the dark. With full confidence that the way before him was safe, he stepped forward toward the light. When it was within arm's reach he stretched out his hand; and at that instant the door behind him closed. By the time that his cell was illuminated sufficiently to

see where he was, he was aware that he was a prisoner.

The sport held the lamp above his head and took a survey of his surroundings.

There was no apparent outlet; and had he not known where to look for it, he would perhaps have failed to discover the door that closed the opening through which he had but just entered.

At the same time, the place did not look as though it had been furnished for a prison so much as for a place of retirement.

He could see that his quarters were as comfortable as such a spot could well be made, and that there was a couch there, such as would be apt to woo a tired or a sleepy man.

Atherton set the lamp down with a laugh, and turned down the wick.

"Well, this beats the hacienda about two to one. Wonder if there is to be the same set of explanations! The game is surely very like; though I would almost be willing to swear that the fair phantom who led me here is not the Lady Eleena. I am in luck just now, and it is hardly worth while to worry myself about what is going to happen. There is a bed, and here is the sleepy-head to fill it. Good-night all. Jack Atherton is going to retire for a rest. Wake him when you want him."

Dressed as he was, he threw himself down, and in a very brief space of time his long-drawn breathing told that he was asleep.

He had spoken aloud, without any idea that he had a listener. It would have surprised him if he had been told that his last words had been heard by the lady who had been his guide hither.

Yet, such was the case. When she closed the slide of her lantern she did indeed retreat for some little distance, so that she would be out of his reach in case the sport attempted to find her in the dark. It would be a bold game for him to play, since she had shown him one of the dangers that might lie in his way; but then, she knew that he was what would seem to most persons a desperate man; and had passed a great share of his life in taking such chances. Her ears were as acute as his, however, and better trained to the place. When he began to step out toward the door she noted it, and followed lightly, using as her guide the wall to the one side, along which ran the path of safety.

She was ready for the sport in case he had deceived her, and was trying the same game. If she had come suddenly into collision with him it is more than likely that he would have shared the fate of Guido, who at that moment was being cared for by the baffled gang of workers, who fancied that he had been struck down by the sport while trying to intercept him.

When Atherton passed through the portals of the cell she was close at his heels; but paused before entering; saw his fingers reaching for the lamp; and then closed the door behind him. Its fastening was simple but solid, and when the bolt once shot into its socket there was no more retreat for Gilt-Edge Johnny.

"He may be uncomfortably near to my apartments, and there is a chance that he may find his way further on; but it is certain he will not vanish until I am ready to have him go. I wonder, will he be raging like a lion, or cooing like a dove, when he finds that he can neither advance nor retire. When I appear again he will have had time to make ready his answer—if my offer is still open. It was foolish in me to speak; the man is but a superb fighting animal; after all, a sleek tiger with strong jaws and cruel fangs. No doubt it is but a passing fancy; though as long as the tiger is your friend it is not so hard to imagine that you love him. And perhaps I may need him before the deal is entirely over."

She had the slide of the lantern open and moved away toward another spot in the wall, where a second door admitted her to an apartment much like that in which Jack was uttering his soliloquy. It was near to it, also, for pausing by the side of the wall to her right, she drew away a slide from a small cavity, and then listened. There was a crevice through which she could both hear and see; and she did not turn away until the sport's regular breathing told that he was asleep.

The sport was tired, and sleepy to boot. As long as it was bringing him no particular danger an earthquake would hardly have awakened him; and in his underground retreat no noises came to his ears, suspicious or otherwise. He slept as soundly as he ever did in his life, and when he awakened again it was broad daylight in the upper world.

He looked around with a yawn, at first scarcely recognizing his surroundings by the faint light that still came from his lamp. His bed was comfortable, and he stretched his limbs, and looked about him without any great amount of curiosity.

"Mighty quiet sort of a place I have struck—good thing I don't have to worry about catching a train. Wonder if it isn't about time to ring for the boy to bring me a sodawater. Must have been on a jaunt around town last night from the way my head feels. Ah! Yes, I remember, now. This thing of sleeping a mile or so underground is worse than a spree, and no mistake. Guess there's no bell to ring; and if the waiters forget me I'll be apt to go thirsty for a time.

From the looks of things I might as well have stayed and fought it out with Pablo's gang."

Nevertheless, he arose, and again turned up his lamp and looked about him, without expecting to make any further discoveries for the present.

He did, however. Some one had been within the room while he slept, and on the table, by the side of the lamp, was a tray on which was a substantial breakfast.

"They don't intend me to starve; and as long as they had the chance to put me out of the road without much trouble, and didn't do it, guess there isn't any danger that the food is off color, and not safe to eat. The cookery for the stables was not so bad; we'll see how the provisions for the parlor taste."

He ate the meal with a tolerable appetite; and afterward ate other meals with a diminishing gusto. He almost lost track of time and date, and if he had been one of the dying kind he would have thrown up his hands and succumbed. He was a prisoner in solitary confinement, and nothing to show that his release was ever counted on. Had it not been that while he slept, his lamp was replenished, and a fresh tray of edibles placed upon his table, he might have thought that he was forgotten. About the only other discovery that he made was an unpleasant one. His revolvers were still in his possession, but in some way he had lost the knife with which he might have attacked the walls of his prison, which he examined a thousand times without finding any way of egress. There were a few suspicious crevices, but with his naked hands he could not enlarge them; and he cared not who might spy upon him through them. There was abundant ventilation, but that appeared to be managed through some arrangement in the ceiling. Whether there was a trap door there, was of little interest, since he could not by any possibility reach it.

"Serves me right," was his mental comment when he reviewed the situation. "If I had stuck to my pard as I ought to have done, and not gone off on a side issue before the main was settled, I would not have got into such a predicament."

He smoked his pipe with as philosophical a relish as possible, and waited for something to turn up. It seemed as though ages had elapsed when, with a new tray of viands, he received a note, the whole having been passed in, as usual, while he slept.

"MY FRIEND:—

"You must pardon me. I have not forgotten; but there are other hands, stronger than mine, that would take thy life in spite of me had I not kept thee hidden. The time for release seems to be close at hand. Be ready for it. There will be ample recompense for all that thou hast suffered."

"THY FRIEND."

"It's time, by glory!" was the ejaculation of the sport.

"Is she going to have a fight with Roldan; and does she want me to do the heavy work while she looks on and claps her hands? By this time Janvrin and his daughter are floating out of the Gulf of Mexico, and the Daisy has forgotten that he ever had a pard. If the lady seems inclined to act on the square, I may not be as obstinate as I was when we last talked the matter over. It is surprising how rest and silence will bring a man to his bearings. I think I would promise a heap to be safely out of this—and unfortunately I have the fatal habit of always keeping my promises. Of one thing the lady can be certain. If I ever get out of this hole she will have some trouble in getting me back. I would sooner fight it out with all the Pablos and Roldans that ever grew than spend another day in this accursed dungeon."

Atherton took it for granted that after receiving such notice he would not have long to wait before finding out what it meant, and though he had managed to possess himself in patience so long as there was no immediate prospect of a change, the very idea that he might soon move his quarters was enough to set him wild.

And then, what seemed to him a strange thing happened. For the first time since his incarceration he heard a sound. Suddenly there came to his ears the voices of two persons, and they were not conversing in the most amiable of manners.

In the voice of one he recognized the tones of the unknown lady who had guided him thither; while the other speaker was Roldan.

CHAPTER XXII.

URSOLA CALLS HER CHAMPION.

"WHAT folly is this? Thou hast not seen me a dozen times; no, scarce the half of that. Yet thou hast spoken as though I was already won, and tacked a threat to the end of thy fine speech. If fair words have not altogether finished the business, there may be some virtue in foul ones."

"Forgive and forget them, then. To see thee once was enough. After that there was but one woman in the world for Roldan, and he put his name and fortune at thy feet. I meant no threat, but if my idle words grieve thee, I eat them with my face in the dust."

The woman laughed a pleasant, ringing laugh; and then, with something of scorn but more of amusement, answered him:

"Because I am found buried in a mine, and

fitting through it like a specter, be not so foolish as to think I know nothing of the world outside—or its ways. I know thee, too. Thy name and thy fortune are not such as would turn the head of a woman of the world. Thy name, for instance, is best known when coupled with that of thy rovers. 'Roldan, the rover!' 'Roldan, the outlaw!' 'Roldan, the man upon whose head a price has been set!' I am no romantic fool to seek to sink my own in names like those. And for thy fortune—at a low ebb would it have been but for my brother. If thou hast any wealth to bestow, it is but the refuse of the mines that in the kindness of his heart he hath allowed thee to work. Such riches as thou hast gathered are poverty itself to one who hath but to name the gold that she would have and it will be poured into her lap. And it was but a few short weeks ago that thou wast bargaining for the hand of the Donna Eleena. I doubt affections which can be so speedily offered in transfer. Thou hast forced thy way here, and when I told thee that thy presence was distasteful, that tongue of thine, to its own hurt, was rash enough to frame a threat. When Sanchez returns, it may be that he will not call thee to account; but if so, he will henceforth be no brother of mine."

"Pardon, pardon! I ask it a thousand times. I simply said that Sanchez was not here, and that until he returned I was the master; a kind master thou mayest be sure. I own that Roldan is no real mate for thee—yet where canst thou find a better? With wealth and beauty ever so great, it must be thy fate to yield them both into the hands of a protector; and where canst thou find a better one than Roldan? Be wise, then, and have him both as thy guide and slave."

"As a guide he might not know the way to open the paths that a woman of wealth and beauty would tread, and as a slave it might not be long before I found him in rebellion. There are better men than thou art, and perhaps nearer to my hand than thou thinkest. When Sanchez left me here it was not altogether unprotected, even if the time should come when I dared no longer depend upon myself alone. Go back to Eleena, the mistress of thy heart but lately; and guide her, and guard her, as thou hast the mind; but leave Ursola alone."

"Thou art mistaken in regard to that same mistress of the ranch. It is true that I spoke something to thy brother as to bettering my fortunes somewhat at her expense; but it was a forlorn hope. For one who knows the legend of the Ranch Accursed, the prospect would be none too cheering, and as I told thy brother not long since, I have thought better of the scheme. There was a truce between the rovers and the ranch; and that will remain unbroken so long as it is a profit to both of us; but since Roldan has seen thee it is not likely that he would care to look again at the Donna, fair as she is known to be."

"And as for him, whoever he may be that thou hast called thy protector, it may be well that I meet him not. I am in no mood for folly, and it is not likely that here I would brook a rival. Should we ever come together, thou wilt have the chance to see the difference between a braggart and a man. He has taken advantage of thy want of knowledge of the world, no doubt. I have told thee naught but the truth, and I swear to it again. Since I have seen thee I have thought of naught else, and if it seems that I have grown desperate, blame thy beauty. Mine thou shalt be, though there were regiments of such men as thou hast spoken of, trying to stand in the way. Fear not; yet, love hath made me bold."

This was the conversation which John Atherton listened to. At first it was a pleasure beyond computation to hear a human voice after the many and weary hours of silence that he had endured. Presently he became interested enough in the first words of the woman to want to hear the rest.

He shrewdly suspected that it was intended by one of the speakers at least that he should do so; and for the other he did not care. The secrets of an outlaw were public property as long as the public could get at them.

He could understand the situation by what he heard; and at the same time he was gathering information which had a personal interest.

So, Ursola was her name; and she was the sister of Sanchez. Roldan had chosen to threaten her; and she had not felt able to repel his advances. Before long she would have need of him. Was a way through the rock to be opened up, or was he to make a discovery that he had all along been overlooking?

While still listening to the two he crept cautiously along the wall, until he found the crevice through which Ursola had spied on him just after he was imprisoned. It had not been there before, he was certain, and doubtless it had been opened for his benefit. He did not hesitate to take advantage of it, and found that he could get a glimpse of the adjoining apartment.

As Roldan ceased speaking he made a movement toward his *vis-a-vis*, and she as suddenly shrunk back.

Seeing this, Roldan spoke again.

"Ha, said I not truly that thou hadst need of

a protector? A friend but steps toward thee and thou art frightened to trembling."

"Back, back! Not another step or the consequences be on thy head."

"But a trifle nearer. If thou art frightened call for thy champion, though I can swear that there is no need for him, and it will be a sad day for him if he comes."

"Make thy words good, then. If I mistake not he is on the threshold, even now. If he betrays the trust I have in him, or is not the man I have taken him for, so much the worse for him and me. Thou wilt have no bloodless victory, even then!"

She had glided backward without making a show of her retreat, and her hand was already on the wall. Now, she pressed a spring, and slowly a section of the solid wall turned upon a brace of pivots, revealing a doorway into an adjoining room.

And in the doorway stood the Gilt-Edge Sport.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A GILT-EDGE SWORDSMAN.

At sight of the seeming Indian, Roldan uttered a harsh laugh.

"And this is thy champion, for whom I had already drawn my sword. Truly, he shall taste it; but not as I had thought. Its edge and point are for men. Applied flat upon his back it may bring him to reason, and teach him that his place is elsewhere."

So Roldan had not recognized him, after all. There could be no mistake about the good faith in which he spoke, and Jack almost forgot his words while he was trying to find a new solution to the puzzle that he had thought already solved correctly. If Roldan and Sanchez had not recognized him, and had not sent him down to be killed by Pablo and his brethren, how did it come that Ursola, whom he had never before seen, knew him? He doubted if the few words she had heard him say to Guido were sufficient to open her eyes.

While he was thinking, Roldan was advancing, and he held his sword upraised, ready to make his threat good whenever he got within reaching distance. If he had been dealing with an ordinary man he would have doubtless succeeded in getting in at least one stroke; even if he did go further than his threat, and make the point taste blood.

Just in time the sport seemed to recollect that he had a contract on hand, and without a word, or a movement that might give notice that he intended to make the resistance which Roldan began to think he would not meet, he sprang within the guard of the outlaw, and with a quick, skillful movement tripped up his heels.

How it was done the Don never knew. All that he was aware of was that he came down with a crash that made him see more stars than were ever in the milky way, and that his blade, dropping from his hand, came clattering down alongside of him.

The young man with the gilt-edge reputation did not attempt to follow up his advantage, but folding his arms looked up at Ursola with a questioning glance.

The lady smiled—and when she smiled she was very charming.

"Well done, my friend; but beware when he rises."

Her caution was not a vain one, since Roldan was not stunned in the least, and lay quiet but for an instant, to collect his thoughts. Then, seizing his sword, he leaped to his feet, and rushed madly at the sport, with an evident intention of annihilating him at once.

It was a moment of danger; but Johnny was equal to the emergency. Had the furious thrust gone home as intended, it would have pierced him through and through.

But, by a dexterous movement of the body, Atherton writhed out of the way, the steel grazing his clothing as the point went crashing against the wall.

Again Roldan fell back, but this time from the force of his own blow. Had not his blade been of the finest temper it would have shattered against the stone on which it struck.

"It is this would-be protector who needs the lesson," smiled the sport.

"If you have a weapon convenient I might use it on him after the fashion he threatened. It is the lesson he wants more than killing, which I like not to undertake to do except as a last resort."

Perhaps Ursola had been looking for something like this, and had been prepared for it. Before Jack could see whence it came she was holding a sabre by the blade, the hilt turned toward him. He caught it from her hand, swung it lightly to test its balance, and then quietly stepped in front of Roldan.

The latter was too angry to think, and too mad to pause.

The blades met with an angry clang, and then, dashing Roldan's point to the right by a power of wrist that was wonderful both for its strength, and the deftness with which it was applied, Johnny sprang to the left with a quick passade, and brought the flat of his blade down upon the shoulder of the Don so sharply that

the sound of the stroke echoed through the room, and fairly caused the Mexican to stagger.

"That much nonsense for the sake of my promise; the balance will be pure business," said the sport, as he threw himself on guard, with his point held somewhat low.

"If the man yearns for dissection I suppose I must try my hand at the operation."

"Have it as thou wilt," laughed the lady, who was looking on with amused interest.

"He may be of use to us yet, and he is a dashing sort of a ruffian, whom it seems a pity to slay; but if it seems best to you, why, work your will."

And as she spoke she lifted her shapely hand, showing her thumb turned down.

"Like a woman—say one thing and act another," thought Jack, whose own voice was for mercy unless the exigencies of the occasion should compel him to strike the death-stroke. Certain it was that he had no thought of taking advantage of the Don while the latter was all abroad.

Roldan was no novice with the weapon he held in his hand, and at last he recognized that he had met a champion worthy of his steel, whom to conquer would require all his skill, and all his coolness. The moment that he could recover himself he did the most sensible thing he had done since the sport made his appearance. He retreated.

He knew that if he was not already a dead man it was because the seeming Indian had spared him; and trusting to that, he leaped out of reach to gain a trifle of time in which he might recover his self-command. He knew that he was raging, just at the moment when he ought to be most dispassionate.

Johnny understood; and nodded.

"It may not be all on one side, after all," he thought.

"The fellow has had a saber in his fist before now, and since he has begun to doubt himself he will take care of himself a little better. I don't want to take him for a schoolboy any more, or I may get left, badly. Let him think the matter over a bit. If he has any favorite dodge I may as well learn it. There ought to be a grain of profit in this nonsense."

Roldan would have been very well content to allow his antagonist to recommence the attack; but after his own vamping he could not wait too long or he would confess that he feared the man he had but so lately despised. Very cautiously did he move within distance, holding his blade well forward, and refusing to engage with his antagonist. Here and there his point darted, in quick feints, yet never so far extending his thrusts that the sport could feel his blade against his own.

Atherton showed no anxiety. Lazily he threw his hand a trifle to this side or that, so as to be ready for a parry should the Don complete his pretended thrusts. Nothing could confuse him; and for this sort of sport he had not studied under the best of masters for nothing. He might have wished that the lights had been a trifle brighter; but he maneuvered so that he could always catch the glitter in Roldan's eye; and was sure that he could tell when the stroke in earnest was coming.

And it came at last. Whether he was or not, he seemed to be a little more careless than usual in his guard, and like lightning the Don lunged out.

"Carajo!" exclaimed the Don.

His blade had gone grinding along that of the sport's, until suddenly there was a wrench that seemed to almost twist his fingers from the palm, and then his sword was on the floor, and the foot of the sport upon the blade.

"No use, my friend. Thou art a good man with the sword, but this is a master. And I can tell thee, now, that I knew not whether he had ever clasped a hilt with his fingers, but judged that he had from his eye. Give it up. Why shouldst thou die?"

As she spoke Ursola dropped her hand upon the shoulder of the Don, and at the touch the baffled man shrunk away, and stood mutely listening, looking from the one to the other in a bewildered sort of way. He was certain at last that here and now he could not hope to be a conqueror.

"Truly, there is great virtue in keeping one's life; and but little wit in throwing it away. I might have known that when Sanchez chose hands to guard thee they would be equal to the work. This ends not here; but for the present, and in thy presence I have had enough of it. What are thy commands? Or if thou hast none I will bid thee good-night and retire. Take heed that thy champion be not more dangerous to thee than Roldan could have ever been."

"Spoken like thyself—all save that caution at the end. The sister of Sanchez needs no cautions. Good-night. When we meet again may it be as friends, since naught but thine own folly could make us otherwise."

"Good-night," replied the Don, with a stately bow; and then he withdrew, leaving the two alone together.

"Thou art good at all things, then?" said Ursola, turning a kindly gaze upon the sport.

"It was something of a risk to ask you to test the hazard of the sword, since men of thy na-

tion but seldom are skilled in its use. But whatever other lesson I might have asked thee to read him, the result would no doubt have been the same. Strange that a man of thy parts should be a homeless wanderer, with scarce one coin to rub against another."

"For Heaven's sake, don't begin to pity me! Every one knows where that will lead a fellow. Rest satisfied that I am a roving blade, and so happened to be to thy hand when my services were needed. There is not apt to be any moss on a rolling-stone; and, to speak after the language of the profane, I hardly think you will find any flies on your humble servant."

"Oh, I complain not, and would scarce have you other than you are. It was fairly done for a man who has but lately been a close prisoner, and even now may be under but a brief reprieve. Many a man would have thought twice before he would have come up to the aid of one who had been his jailer, gently though the work might have been done. Speak your own language. You can see that it is as natural to me as my mother tongue."

"I see that we are not so far over the border, and yet there are a surprising number of persons who can say the same thing. I sometimes doubt whether there is not more of dream than reality in all this. For instance: I never knew a Mexican to take punishment as kindly as did this same Don Roldan. Perhaps he expects to try the knife when we meet again, and the meeting will be arranged to be in the dark, and your humble servant asleep; but all the same, he retired more gracefully than I thought was possible for a baffled lover, and a vanquished rival."

"A rival! It appears to me that thou art progressing fast. Am I to find thee more presumptuous than Roldan himself? He had met me nearly a dozen times; and this is but the second time that thou hast laid eyes on me."

"True, but Roldan has not had encouragement."

"Encouragement?"

"Something was said, I believe, about a guide and a guard; and shortly thereafter I was called upon to act, I hope, as both. If that be not encouragement, thy lovers must have been wonderfully bashful in the past, or thou hast been singularly free from the pests."

"It appears to me that thou hast forgotten thy answer when I asked some time ago for those same services of thine. It is true that I referred to thee when Roldan was pressing his suit; but I simply told him what we both very well know, that thou art the better man. I needed thee not, and perhaps it was a mistake for him to have seen thee; but it was hard to resist the pleasure of giving him a lesson. It is time, now, for thee to make thy escape. Sanchez, as thou hast heard, is absent, and Pablo and his friends deem that thou hast got away by some means not known to them. I can lead thee out of this before Roldan finds out how to close the way. There were certain friends for whom thou wast looking. I can give thee no help save to make thee sure that they are not here. Best it is for thee to hasten now, since there can be no telling what happened in the days that were lost."

"Thanks for the hint; by this time the Daisy is either dead, or looking for me. The others have had time enough to learn to depend on themselves; and, altogether, I think it is rather my duty to look out for number one."

CHAPTER XXIV.

ROLDAN'S HEART SOFTENS.

ROLDAN was not as innocent as he looked. Once satisfied that he was thoroughly beaten, without a chance to get even, and he went away without offering to air the suspicions which naturally arose. When he was fairly out of sight and hearing he fully justified the opinion which Jack had expressed. His face took on a scowl; and he shook his fist back over his shoulder, while he continued to hurry along, guiding his steps by the lantern he had picked up outside the apartment.

"Never fear, Roldan will be even yet. I can see, now, that they think me their dupe; but they will find that this little check breaks not my spirit."

"And I think I have my lady on the hip. No Indian bravo ever swung such a sword. He is the American of whom Sanchez spoke. They have brought him hither to do their work when they are tired of me. And yet he cannot understand what it is they are doing to his friends; for his friends they must be. The mocking fiend! She would make a saint do murder by giving him a nod; and she can lead a man to the devil in spite of himself. Does she care for him? If I only knew for a certainty I would lay such a scheme! Oh, I would bring her to her senses, or I would let her know what it is to make sport of Roldan. Here, he is the power; for behind him are the rovers, as well as the men who work the mines; while they are but two—and Sanchez might not return. He has some plot against the mistress of the ranch, if I mistake not. Let him plot, though. Meantime, Ursola must be made mine. Perhaps, if I saw the Americans I might learn more of the game afoot. Perhaps, too, it would be worth one's while to seem to be their friend; and even

to bring them to this man. It will show, then, whether he is a rival or a hired assassin."

With the captain of the rovers, to think was to act. He had forgotten that it was to Sanchez he was indebted for a knowledge of these old mines, from which he was drawing the wealth he so long had coveted; and was bent only on revenge.

First, however, he sought the mouth of the mine, and had an interview with one of his lieutenants. It struck him that his late narrow escape should be sufficient warning not to venture too far without a supporting force which could be called on in case of need.

It took but a few moments to explain what it was that he wanted, and as his band was under a good discipline whenever he chose to have it enforced, he had no doubt about his directions being obeyed.

Then, he went down into the mine again; but this time turned off into a shaft which had an ancient and an unused look. The lead had been worked out in that direction, and the rock that served for roof and wall was barren, as an experienced miner could tell at a glance.

The workings in the mine had been of vast extent, extending as they had done over a number of generations, and the Don was hardly as certain of his road as he would have liked to have been. He held his lantern high, and stepped cautiously. He had only traversed this path on one other occasion, and then had Sanchez for a guide, besides being too thoroughly occupied to give much attention to his surroundings.

"When I have made sure of this all being mine I shall have to look through it thoroughly, and learn the ins and outs of the place. So long as I do not know them, Sanchez and his sister might almost have me at their mercy. I believe that I am just beginning to cross the threshold of its secrets. It would not surprise me to find traces of a hacienda in the neighboring valley, or a fortress on the mountain-side. There are secret doors that look like the solid rock, and there are hidden passages which seem to have neither beginning nor end when one drops into them through some side entrance which he finds by chance. Who would have supposed that there was a man within call when Ursola was facing me so boldly? And who would have guessed that where the rock looked to be the most solid there a door was ready to fly open at a touch of her finger? Enchantment, perhaps; but one day, soon, Roldan shall be able to wield the magic wand as well as the best of them."

He stopped finally in front of what seemed to be solid rock. It almost appeared ridiculous for him to be passing his hand here and there over the wall, but he knew what he was about. He remembered the spot thoroughly, and just where Sanchez had pressed when he wanted to open the way to what lay beyond. To tell the truth, Roldan had left a little mark there, thinking that some time he might want to identify the spot. He then had no idea that he and Sanchez would soon be at odds; but it was a secret that was as well to have beyond the chance of losing.

Success rewarded his efforts to find the spring, and as he pressed it and opening appeared. At the same time a strange sound came from beyond.

It was something like the music that is made on a violin; and yet a listener would pronounce it only an imitation, even if he could not guess how it was produced.

Roldan raised his lantern and peered into the darkness beyond.

The music did not cease, though it was but a few yards to where the musician crouched by the side of the wall, his resting-place a bench of stone. The Mexican could see that there was a chain to the one wrist, and that the other arm hung, apparently helpless, at his side. The music, such as it was, came from between his lips: as an imitation, it was almost perfect.

"Mad, if I mistake not; is it worth while to spend one's time on him?" thought Roldan, hesitating. "If the girl is as wild-eyed and gaunt, they can give me no aid."

Yet he passed within the room, after he had made sure that it was no raging maniac with whom he would have to deal.

Then, from one corner of the room, which was a bare cell of a dozen feet in width, and perhaps twice that in length, another figure came slowly out into the circle of light cast by the lantern.

There was little change in the judge, but Morgiana had not borne her imprisonment well. She looked taller and thinner; her eyes were deeply sunken; and looking into her face it would be hard to believe that she had not long ago been a woman of more than ordinary beauty.

"Who are you?" she asked, looking up at the Don without fear, and with little hope in her lack-luster eyes.

"A friend, I hope, if I be trusted as such. At some risk, and much trouble, I have come to tell thee that there is no need to despair. Thou art not forgotten, and thy friend is searching for thee. Since I have found thee it will not be long before I can guide him to this spot; or else help thy father and thee to find him."

"Friend! I know of no friend who would

care whether we lived or died. And thou art a stranger, whom I would sooner suspect to be a foe. If it is but to make sport of our misery, and to mock us in our woe, that thou hast come, leave us. The reason of my poor father is gone, and mine is going. For us there is only darkness and death, and we dread the latter the least."

It was true enough. The darkness of the dungeon had been complete. From time to time there had been light enough granted the two to enable them to see the food that was furnished them; but it had always been soon withdrawn. The wonder was that both of the prisoners were still living. Even Roldan felt a flash of anger at the infernal cruelty which had condemned them to this.

"Thy suffering—which soon will be at an end—hath made thee forget. There is a young American—the same who brought thy father out of danger at the time of the stampede of the great herd—who fears nothing on earth; and who calls himself thy friend. Have faith in him. He is near, and in searching for thee; though the work hath gone on but slowly. Better to feel sure of the way, than to fall into some pitfall. He will come to the rescue in due time, and thou wilt have ample revenge for all thou hast suffered."

"Who speaks of revenge? So we are safely out of this, what care we for the rest of the world? Perhaps the stranger will come—he often does when there is one in danger—but if it is not soon it will be too late. And what can one man do against a score? My poor father! He is a cripple, now, who must be carried back to the light if he is ever again to see it; and even then it will be but to die."

And then Morgiana, who had braved so many dangers without a shudder, and faced death more than once with cheerful courage, fell to weeping in a hopeless sort of way, that showed how completely her spirit was broken.

Roldan was a desperate man, and one who had crime enough to answer for; but he was touched by the depth of despair in Morgiana's tones. If he could help her—and at the same time further his own interests—he was willing to make the effort, even sooner than he had counted on. There was nothing to prevent his moving these prisoners; but he understood that if he did so it would be war to the knife with Sanchez and his sister—war, at least, until he had shown that he could conquer. Then, perhaps, they would be willing to come to terms. It was a risk to run, but his life had been full of risks, and when they seemed the greatest was when he had accepted them the most cheerfully.

"Thou hast had great courage or before this thou wouldst have been frightened to death; yet I see that this hath told on thee. It will be the greater risk, yet perhaps it would be best to make the effort now, and wait not for the coming of that friend whom thou hast almost forgotten. That is, if thy father has the strength to follow. If not, there is nothing to do but to leave thee here until further help can be found."

How is it? Will he follow thee to liberty, and safety? See, I have unlocked his fetters. He is free to act if he will."

The strange music had never ceased, save now and then when the judge drew in a long breath, or, perhaps, silently thought of some other tune. Now stronger, and again only a faint breath, the music had wailed on, while the judge appeared to remain unconscious of the presence of his visitor.

The words of Roldan fell unnoticed on his ears; but they had an immediate effect upon his daughter. She ceased her weeping, save now and then a choking sob which she could not repress; and moving forward took the candle from the hand of the outlaw, and held it up so that the glare fell full upon his face, which she scrutinized long and earnestly.

"You are speaking from the heart, and yet the face tells me that the heart is bad. It is no jest: and yet something tells me that the words are not in earnest. If I was sure; if I was only sure!"

"Be sure, then. On the word of Roldan, who has done all things but lie, I would do as I say, and help thee to baffle thy foes. Being sure of this, do what was in thy mind."

"The case can be no worse. I will make one effort to arouse father. Perhaps the hope of escape can be implanted in his mind; and that may give him the strength that has seemed so sadly wanting. There must be no failures, for it will be the last flicker of life in the socket, and if that goes out what matter will it be what becomes of me!"

She passed over to the judge, and took him lovingly but firmly by the shoulder.

At the touch the strange music ceased, and he stared up vacantly into her face.

"Listen, father. Are you willing to make one bold attempt to leave this place? Remember, your enemy is not dead. There is still hope for you in life if you can escape. No crime have you committed; and if you evade her now her arm will not be long enough to reach you again, when once we have fled from this spot where she seems to have power."

With one of those sudden changes which characterized his condition, the judge became him-

self. Weak, tottering, perhaps; but a man of courage and resource.

"True: if there is an opportunity to leave this cachot I will go, if it is on my hands and knees. I am weak, it is true; but there is a strength of despair which I think I have. Fear not for me. If you trust this man let him lead on and I will follow."

He steadied himself as he spoke, and slowly raised his bandaged arm into position in a rude sling which hung from his neck, and made a step toward the door.

"This way, then," said Roldan, speaking more gently even than he knew, and kindly offering his arm to support the judge.

"The way is open now; but it may not be for long. Before they know of your escape you will be far enough away from this."

"Indeed!" said a low, sweet, feminine voice; and at the doorway appeared Ursola, a malicious smile on her face, and in her hand a revolver, with which she took deliberate aim at Roldan's heart.

CHAPTER XXV.

ELEENA MAKES A CAPTIVE.

WHEN the sport awakened Eleena and explained to her what had happened she took the information but coolly; and left him to pursue his investigations alone. Had there not been a woman in the case she might not have shown such lukewarmness. She had been all kindness to Morgiana; but it was a wound to her pride that the Gilt-Edge Sport would come to give the wandering girl a warning where he had refused to enter at her own invitation.

In addition, she desired to be alone, so that she could think over what had happened, and come to some understanding about the matter. With Atherton rushing her from this spot to that, and asking questions such as he might, she could think coolly about nothing.

So she bid him good speed, and saw him go off to the vaults, and the passage that led from them to the *barranca* without much thought of the danger into which he might be thrusting himself; and in the hope that he would soon be back, and that by that time she would have an explanation and a remedy.

Meantime, she looked over the building.

Of the half-dozen house-servants, three of them she could account for. The others had either taken fright and fled; or they had been carried away. Had Sanchez a part in the affair; or had he been taken along as a prisoner also?

There was little doubt in her mind that it was the former, and she did not expect that he would be there very soon to answer her questioning.

"I will wait," she thought, "until I hear from the American. If he comes not back, or fails to find traces of the missing one, at daylight I will hunt up some of the men from the outlying buildings, and take the trail myself. I am afraid that I understand the mystery but too well; yet I must know the truth beyond peradventure. Oath or not, if Sanchez has proved false to me, the time has come when I must see to my own protection."

She was destined to wait for the American a long time.

As the reader knows, he had passed from the vaults on into the *barranca*, and so on to the trail of the missing ones.

It was no pleasant thing to be alone in the hacienda after such a happening, and long enough before morning dawned Eleena wished that she had a companion, even if it was but one of the serving maids, who had gone to a *baille*, or *fandango*, and might not return until day-break. She had promised to make a search of the house, and the surrounding grounds, and she kept her word; but found nothing to reward her scrutiny. Nowhere could she find any marks of violence, and she began to believe that the sport was upon the right track. The only fear was that he might run himself into danger in the darkness below. If there had been any plot against the Janvins it was more than likely that Atherton would be included in it, too.

She could not sleep; and after a time found that she could not rest. With a light in one hand and a revolver in the other she went down into the cellarage, and searched the hidden rooms, finally following the passage by which the *barranca* was reached.

Her eyes were not as well-trained as those of Gilt-Edge Johnny, or else she had not the courage to look far enough. She did not find the marks which told him that he was on the right track, and so, at last, fearing to venture further in the gloom, she went back, wondering and half afraid.

Her maid-servants came back safely enough; but the men who had been missing during the night were not to be seen the following day. In fact, they did not make their appearance at all. Had she looked for the fellows at the mine she might have found them. In their place other men were drafted in; for the Ranch of the Golden Dream had retainers enough and to spare. Then, for a time, things went on somewhat after their former fashion, before Sanchez came to live at the ranch. She did not care to make any great ado about the disappearance of her late guests; and though she quietly made

some search over the surrounding country, she heard nothing of the missing ones. Even Sanchez appeared to have dropped entirely out of her life.

There was one thing she did, the reason for which she hardly was willing to admit to herself. To a certain extent she turned day into night, and night into day. In other words, she rested by daylight; and when the darkness came down was the widest awake. Something seemed to tell her that there was to be a sequel to the late affair, and she wished to be ready for it.

"It can not be borne," she was saying to herself, one night.

"Since Margaritta left me I have been alone. I must have another companion, or leave this at whatever cost. I would sooner be a prisoner in a dungeon, with the certainties of my life marked out for me, than caged here with the unknown, which somehow seems to be terrible, to happen. If there is no change for the better in the next day, I turn things over to Leon, to go to destruction if they must, and I seek something better than this solitude."

She was not so much alone as she had thought.

Looking out of the open window she saw the figure of a man, who was advancing cautiously toward the building.

He was evidently anxious that his presence should not be observed, and though she had but an indistinct view of him she was almost certain that he was a stranger. At least, it was no one who would have any right there, though it might, of course, be some one who was seeking an interview with one of the domestics.

Slowly he came, until at last he halted, not a stone's throw from the window through which the Donna was watching. Then he took a long look in every direction, especially examining the house.

"He is looking to see if there is any one awake and about. If he sees nothing to alarm him his next move will be to enter. What can the man want? Is he a thief? Let him come. He will find the mistress at home, and ready for him."

And as she spoke the Donna moved a little further back from the window, since she had guessed that he intended to attempt an entrance at that very point.

Nor was she mistaken. Seeing that the coast was apparently clear, the prowler again advanced, until he could place his hand on the window-sill.

Then he listened again, for a moment, and hearing nothing that might arouse his suspicions, he vaulted into the room.

Once there and he was perfectly at home. He looked around at the furniture, as faintly seen in the dim light, and shrugged his shoulders.

"A cozy nest, it is, for so foul a bird. If one wished to take it, there would be rare plunder, no doubt; but Guido is no thief. While the vulture is away he will destroy the nest; and if the blaze brings the old bird back to the spot, so much the better for Guido, and so much the worse for the bird. A long score is there to settle; and too long has it been running. To-night the settlement begins. Not here, though. The room beyond will better suit. Let the blow fall on the heart, and the work is the more certainly done."

With Eleena following him, as silently as though she was a ghost, Guido left the room, to enter another which seemed better suited for the work he intended to do.

But here the curtains were closed, and the darkness was more intense when he closed the door than he had counted. Crouching toward the floor he carefully struck a match, and when the little flame began to burn steadily he held it over his head, and looked around.

The first thing he saw was the Donna, standing in front of him, with her pistol aimed at his head, and a cold smile on her face.

The match dropped from his fingers as he cowered back in alarm.

"The witch, herself! The vampire!"

As he spoke Eleena took a step or two to the side, until her hand rested upon a door. Flung this wide open a flood of light entered from the adjacent room, and in its midst was the crouching Guido.

"Do not move, my friend," laughed the Donna, perfectly at her ease.

"Thou art in the nest; but the vulture is at home. Perhaps it may not be so easy to work thine own royal will. Move now and it is death on the spot. I never threaten idly. What object brought thee here?"

"To burn the roof that, from mother to mother, has sheltered the accursed brood. I could have sworn that thou wert miles and miles away. I left thee there, at least; and came as fast as a good mustang could carry me."

"A little wild, my friend. From this place I have not stirred this day, so that it would have been hard to leave me behind. And so far as I know, I am neither witch nor vampire, but simply a woman who is anxious to live at peace with all mankind, and who has never done any wrong to thee or thine. I must protect my property, now that I have seen that it is in danger, though I am not so sure that it would not have been a favor had it burned down this night, so that I escaped with my life."

"And looking at Guido thy word still is that he was never wronged by thee? Of what use? But for a friend, who came when hope had gone, I might have been dead in thy dungeons, even now. I stayed there long enough to show me that I was forgotten. And before that. Had Guido ever a daughter, who was slain by thee? Not here; but thousands of miles away, at the other side of the sea, across which he has tracked thee."

"Hardly, since across the sea I have never been, much as I have desired it. What else?"

"Oh, it is folly to question when thou knowest but too well what it is I have written down. Slay now, when the chance is in thy hand. If not, who knows? The day, or the night, may come when the fiend will not protect thee. Had I not thought that thou wast busy with thy victim, and that this was the time to strike the first blow, I had stayed there to watch. The friend that was by my side when the stroke of thy knife so narrowly missed my heart, is not dead yet; and when he knows all the truth may turn and rend thee, if my hand fails."

"More riddles. If I mistake not, never have mine eyes fallen upon thee before, and who thy friend can be I know not. What to do with thee I am not so certain. It is unpleasant to have a madman creeping around in the night to burn and destroy; and it is as bad to have his blood on one's hands. Supposing I set thee free, what security have I that my life will be safe from a coward's shot in the back, or my home from a midnight torch?"

"Prove that thy words are true, and from Guido there will be no more danger."

The man was over the first wave of surprise; and had been listening thoughtfully to the words that had just dropped slowly from the mouth of the Donna. About them there was an unfamiliar sound; and for the first time he began to doubt. He showed it in both voice and manner; and Eleena noticed the change.

"It might be hard to prove what I have said; yet it is none the less the truth. As a recluse here for years it may not be easy to prove what I have done, and what not done. I give you only the word of a woman, who would rather convince than not, but who has no hesitation about protecting herself if need be. I have my suspicions of what thy words may mean; but so long as they apply not to me I have nothing further to say."

"Then it was not thy hand that took away the visitors from under this roof; nor yet was it at thy command that the handsome American was led down to be hacked to pieces by Pablo and his gang. It may be that the mystery here is deeper than I thought. If so, I am thankful that my hand was stayed before the damage was done."

"It may be my turn to question thy truth. If thou art not speaking at random, it sounds as though thou hast the information for which I have been seeking. What became of those same visitors? They vanished; and I have not known which way to turn in hope to find them."

"And thou knowest nothing of the Royal Mine, that for years has been the source of wealth to the ranch of the Golden Dream? Nothing of its wonderful mysteries; of the wealth which is even now being torn from its depths; or the prisons and the palaces that have been used as needed, from one generation to another?"

"Of such a spot have I heard; but it has never been my fortune to visit it, since the secret of its location was long ago lost."

"Yet it is not unknown to Sanchez; and to Roldan and his rovers. Thy guests are all there, father, daughter, and the brave American who saved me from thy dungeons. If thou art not the woman whose servant I was willing for a little while to be, that I might the more certainly strike when the time came, who, then, is she? She is there—and thou art here. It must be as thou hast said. I begin to see the truth at last. It is well that thou hast not been made to suffer for the sins of another."

"And well, perhaps, that fate hath sent thee here. If thou canst show the way to those same mines, it will be worth money to thee; and perhaps thy revenge may not be so far off when thou hast reached them."

"The way thither can I show; but it will be at thine own risk. Roldan will not care to have thee come poaching on his estate—for he seems to claim it now as his own. And though I know not what Sanchez is to thee, yet it will not be safe to trust him when his interests run against thine."

"The risk be mine. I go not alone; and I trust not myself within their clutches until I have found out more of their history of the past, and the condition of things in the present. And I take with me some little force, so that if we can but find that same bold American, and win him over to our side, I will fear neither Sanchez nor the rovers, so long as the field is open."

"It will be war, then?" asked Guido, evidently pleased with the thought.

"War, unless the wrongs they have done to my hospitality be righted, and the wealth of the Golden Dream be directed to the channels in which it should run. War to the knife."

"Enough! Trust me, and gather thy men. I can guide thee to the spot; prove what I have said; and help thee to win wealth and revenge."

Truly, the coming of Guido was destined to work far different results from those he had expected.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OPEN POSTERN.

Now that she had some idea of what was to be done Eleena was willing enough to start out on the war-path without delay; and it fretted her that some hours must elapse before anything further could be done.

Yet a few hours' sleep would not be a bad preparation for the fatigue that might be before her, and Guido himself felt the need of rest. He had been in the saddle for many hours, and now that hate no longer bore him up, felt the exhaustion of reaction as well.

While they were talking over the matter of his presence, and Eleena was laboring to convince him of his mistake, she had paid but little attention to his appearance. When, at last, it was settled that she had won him over to her side, and that they were to be allies, she took a closer look at him, both to see what manner of man he might be; and to decide what it was best to do with him for the remainder of the night.

He was older than she had thought—a score of years older than herself; and had a face that was marked somewhat by suffering. Yet, as she had gathered from his conversation, he was no common boor; but a man who had some education and refinement. Perhaps he had not sprung from a family as old as that of Roldan, and he had not the air of Sanchez, the Silent; but for all that he was one whom she felt she would sooner trust than either, once he had ceased to imagine himself her deadly foe. There was no sign that he was mad or moonstruck, nor yet did he look like a villain. She believed that, as he had said, he had suffered grievous wrong at the hands of some one whom he had confounded with her, and that henceforth, unless in some unforeseen way his suspicions were again aroused, he would be willing to treat her as a friend. She did not hesitate, then, in making him her guest.

"The third door from this you will find open, and the room ready for a guest. Honor me by its occupancy for the night. I shall be up by daybreak, and ready, soon after, for the road. Sooner than that I cannot go."

"Soon enough will that be. I had never thought to be a guest within the walls of the Ranch Accursed; but it must be so. Good-night, and forget not."

There was little danger that the Donna would forget, since she had been thinking of little else than the Janvins and the sport since the night of their disappearance; and was as anxious to go to them as Guido could be to reach the mine. It was no easy task for her to compose her nerves, though it was done within a short time, and her slumber was sound until the hour of daybreak came.

Then, without awakening her guest, who was more weary than he had thought, she quietly began to arrange for her journey.

There was no one there to interfere with her plans, or to whom she needed to give any explanation.

Until a short time before the appearance of the sport on the scene Eleena had managed to keep with her a companion; but the young lady had left her, so that she had no friend to whom she could confide. Sanchez had been a mentor after a certain sort; but Sanchez was no longer there. If he had been, it is not likely that she would have cared to have a consultation concerning her resolution. He might not have uttered a protest—and yet Eleena was aware that he had a way of ordering her actions which she did not altogether understand. She was very willing to dispense with his company, both at this time and at every other. There was Leon, the general manager of the place, and the one to whom she trusted for assistance in the present emergency; but he had no opinions of his own to ventilate when once his mistress had aired her own. If she told him to have half a dozen, or a dozen, men in the saddle at a certain hour, he would have them ready. If she told him to follow, she knew that he would not halt until she gave the signal. A useful man was Leon, though it had seemed to her of late that Sanchez would have been glad to dispense with his services at the Ranch of the Golden Dream; and that he, in turn, was inclined to doubt them both. She went to look for him at daybreak—and it turned out that he was not hard to find. He was just stepping from the cabin which he occupied as his headquarters, and was duly surprised to come face to face with his mistress.

"Have half a dozen men, who know how to fight, in the saddle in an hour, ready for a long march. I will join them then, or shortly thereafter. Pick good men, who will run from nothing, since they may have to save their lives and mine."

Leon showed no curiosity; and had already disburdened himself of his surprise. He simply

said that they should be ready. The late brush with the marauding Indians had given him an opportunity to judge what the men who worked under him could and would do; and he promised that the draft should be met.

"I go to find the old mines that once were worked by the mistress of the Golden Dream."

"Si, senora."

"I have reason to believe that Roldan, the outlaw, has taken possession of them. If I find him there, trouble may follow."

"Si, senora."

"As he was outlawed for political offense, in the first place, we have felt no call to meddle with him; and it has been understood that he touched nothing that belonged to us. If he has broken that compact—so much the worse for him."

"Si, senora. So far as half a dozen men can withstand him, my men will be ready. After that—"

He shrugged his shoulders expressively, to complete the sentence, and stood in an attitude of respectful attention.

Eleena had nothing more to say. It was too soon to discuss her plans, since they were scarcely matured; and she knew that she could rely on Leon to act blindly. Nothing that she could tell him would make him a whit more faithful. Without further explanation, she turned back to the hacienda, and equipped herself for the journey.

The ride was a long one, and it had its dangers. From dawn to dark the party was in the saddle, save for a short rest at noon; and it was still some distance to the spot where the Gilt-Edge Sport had been halted by the outpost when they drew rein, after a brief consultation between Eleena and her guide.

So far they had been fortunate in not meeting with a living soul. Guido had led them by a more devious route than that which had been followed by Atherton, and he was confident that their presence in the neighborhood had not been suspected by Roldan. For the present, Leon and his men were to remain hidden; and having given a few brief instructions, Eleena and her guide moved on.

"It will be daylight before we can return," said Guido, as they passed beyond hearing.

"It will be a tiresome journey, besides the danger, but if thou art anxious to make it I would not attempt to dissuade thee. Thou hast told me something as we came along, and I see that thou art not altogether posted in the affairs of thy family. Something will be learned to-night, perhaps; and if we can but enter the mine without being seen I guarantee that the rest will be safe and simple, since it is but to find out how the land lies. Should chance offer the opportunity for more, the choice will be with thee, as to whether it shall be taken."

"And this entrance, by which thou hast come and gone—is it known by Roldan?"

"Perhaps—or by Sanchez. But it is not guarded, and the way of approach is so sheltered that it could almost be reached in spite of their eyes. It will take courage to follow me; but with that thou art safe enough."

"The courage will be mine; see to it that the truth be thine. If a thought of treachery enter thy mind, strangle it quickly, for I strike thee dead if I see it in thine eyes."

"Strike at any time that it may seem best to do so; Guido will always be willing to receive the stroke. There is nothing left to live for save vengeance; and even that grows tiresome as it seems to come nearer."

"I believe that it was more amazement than terror which held thee so speechless when first I appeared to thee at the ranch. To thy vengeance I will not aid thee; but I doubt if I care to interfere, whatever course it may take, so that I am certain it strikes the right victim. But if I save not my guests, then I can join you in your own work. That they should have been stolen from beneath my own roof-tree I can neither forget nor forgive."

"I ask no promise, though I can guess that the time will come when thy hand will raise with mine. Roldan has had a secret power over thy ranch, that it has not seemed good for thee to fight against. But when once the battle has been joined I suspect that thou wilt be with me to the bitter end. So I hope; yet if not I place no blame on thee. Blood is strong; and a family secret can chain its members together closer than aught else."

"True. And yet, what is the family to me? I would save my share of its wealth; not for my sake, but for the sake of my child. Thank heaven that it is not here to be in all this danger! And for the sake of that child I would have avoided the publication of what may after all be but an open secret. It may be that I have been under a spell; if so, the spell is broken."

"Or will be when thou hast heard the whole truth, which, even now, thou art far from knowing. Let the matter rest for the present. I will guide thee as well as another could, and ask less reward, perhaps. It is best for the future, to be silent, since we are coming near to the spot where it is possible that one of the rovers may be on guard."

After that, although there was a tiresome tramp before them, they pursued their way in

silence, save for an occasional whispered word or two as to the route before them. After a while they began an ascent, that was rough, and led over a narrow trail that lay between boulders, and overhanging rocks. The darkness was deep, and had her guide deserted her Eleena would have had trouble to find her way back before morning, so that it was with some suspicion that she heard him whisper.

"For a moment, without moving in the least, remain here, where I can find thee again. The point I spoke of is near at hand, and I would see that the way is clear. If it is, there will be but a few more steps to take until there will be a light to show the way. For the safety of both of us is this necessary."

"Go, then. But be not long about returning. I like not the place; and if thou hast meant any treachery it will not be hard to bring it to a successful ending."

"Fear nothing. There seems to be no one here; and a moment will be sufficient to show whether the way beyond is safe and clear. Trust me."

He dropped her hand, and moved silently away. After an absence of a few moments he came gliding back.

"The way is clear, and we can pursue our course in safety."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ATHERTON TO THE RESCUE.

DURING his imprisonment the sport had fared rather better than the Janvrins, and though he hardly felt at his best, his spirits had not been broken at all, while his judgment was as good as ever.

In the word-fencing which followed the departure of Roldan he had his wits thoroughly about him; and was watching the strange woman with a keenness that she felt, and was not altogether easy under, though she allowed no sign of that fact to appear in her countenance. The trouble was that neither put too much faith in what the other said.

In his love-making Gilt-Edge Johnny was as free and easy as in every thing else that he undertook; though he was a trifle more distant than he would have been had he felt more certain of his ground.

Ursola was surely inviting him to escape—but did she mean it?

Jack was putting himself almost on the footing of an accepted lover—but was he in earnest?

It might be that the lady was testing the strength of the passion she had evolved; and it was possible that if he evinced the least eagerness to take her at her word, and be led away, she would only try to remand him to the confinement from which she had allowed him to see a way. And if he remained, all that she said in regard to the Janvrins might be at random, or wide of the truth.

So Jack showed little interest in the Janvrins; and appeared to be willing to allow the Daisy to take care of herself.

When he spoke of number one he did it with a look which left but little doubt as to his meaning.

"This fancy of thine is very sudden," said Ursola, drawing back a little as she saw that the sport was edging toward her.

"For I hardly dare say how long I have been fretting at thy position, and hoping the way to change it would soon be open; and now I find that I might have spared myself the trouble of mind, and the Don his abasement. Go back to thy dungeon, then, and take thy chances. It may be a month before I can offer again to throw open the doors."

"Oh, no. Excuse me; but I have not the least desire in the world to return to solitude. I accepted it because there was nothing better at hand; but now that I have learned more of the secrets of the place, I prefer a little more gorgeous furniture, and a fare that is not so evidently designed for an anchorite. Lead me out of this, if you will, but ask me not to call it an escape. I might be willing to make it a flight, were that same flight shared by you; but I am not running for Roldan and his rovers, and as for thy brother, Sanchez—he seems to be a man of sound sense, and somewhat my friend. I can assure you that he has no fear of this outlaw, and if his interests and yours lay together, I would be willing to make common cause with you both against the captain of the rovers. Then, why not bring us together?"

"It might be worth while to try it," said Ursola, hesitatingly.

"Yet, brother though he be, I am willing to admit that Sanchez bath his dangerous moods, and is quick to act, even if regrets may follow. I would not care to have him meet thee without some preparation. The truth is, he and I are not altogether of one mind. This Roldan is a friend of his, and for the sake of his interests Sanchez would think twice before he crossed him. It was on account of this that I appealed to thee for help at the time when I was so cavalierly repulsed. The way is not yet clear, however, and for the present it is best to keep thee out of his sight. Man alive! If I was sure that

thou wert to be trusted, I would say that there is now the chance for thee of thy lifetime. There is wealth here, unbounded, and it is fitter that thou shouldst have it than that it should go into the hands of a man like the rover. From what thy life seems to have been, one would think that there would be no hesitation. To my mind you are a man among men. Cannot I trust thee, then?"

Perhaps Ursola had been led to say more than she intended; and again, it was as likely that she was but testing him. The same answer would do in either case, and the sport responded promptly:

"With thy life, if need be. I have not been days in that hiding-place for nothing. It was but natural that I should think of the last face I had seen—and the last face was thine. Order me and I obey. Send me back to the dungeon if it please thee, and I will go. Lead me from here and I will follow. I am in thy hands, and though I say it myself, a better backer man nor woman ever had."

"I half believe thee. It is a risk, but one that I am ready to run. Remain here a few moments. I will see that the coast is clear, and then return to lead thee to a spot where thou wilt be as safe, and much more comfortable than that late hiding-place could be made. I am accustomed to this life beneath the ground, and can accept it for a little because there is safety and profit in it; but since Roldan now knows of thy presence it will be neither pleasant nor safe for thee any longer. But a few moments, then. It is better to be sure that he is not lurking near with that same knife of which thou hast spoken."

"A few minutes let it be."

She smiled, waved her hand gracefully, and went out of the door through which Roldan had passed.

"Evidently she has heaps of confidence in yours truly, or else she forgot to lock the door. Such confidence shall not be abused—unless I find that a bolt has been shot on the other side."

So the sport thought to himself, and without hesitation, or thought of the danger of discovery, he followed Ursola into the passage.

She was already some distance away. She carried a lantern, as one had to who wished to move with freedom in these strange passages, and dangerous corridors. He watched her light, graceful step until he thought that there would be no danger of her seeing him should she give a rearward look, and then followed with a pace that was accommodated to hers.

So it happened that when Ursola confronted Don Roldan and the escaping prisoners, Gilt-Edge Johnny was almost at her shoulder.

What he saw took the sport by surprise. There was to be war between Ursola and Don Roldan; and the first move seemed to have been for the Don to contract an alliance with the Janvrins. On which side was Atherton to declare himself? Certain it was that the beautiful woman had been as false as fair, and he could now believe that not a word of truth had she told him.

He was in a trap himself, and it seemed hardly possible that his interference could help the prisoners; yet he felt little like trusting Roldan; and not at all like reposing confidence in Ursola. He waited to see what would be the upshot of the interference. Then, he intended to let circumstances indicate what would be his better course.

Roldan had been taken by surprise, and cumbered as he was with the judge, who, at the sound of that voice suddenly leaned heavily upon his arm, he did not even make a motion toward the weapons that were at his waist. Had it been possible he might not have cared to shoot down this beautiful woman, but he recognized the fact that his life would be in danger if he attempted resistance without the ability to strike quickly and sure. With Janvrin hanging on his arm, and Morgiana supporting her father from the other side, the three stood as though stricken speechless.

"What, nothing to say! And this is how Roldan keeps faith with those who have thrown wealth and safety into his arms. Truly, what is there left to do with such a traitor but to slay? I know of but one man in whose word I would trust; but there are a few with ordinary gratitude in their souls. Thou, Roldan, art not one of them."

"Foolish child," said Roldan, finding his tongue when he knew that he was not threatened with instant death.

"Said I not that when Sanchez was not here I was master of all things in the mine? If I chose to move the prisoners from one spot to another, what reason is there to question my good faith? Better not to interfere until the reasons for the act have been heard. When it comes to immediate safety no one but a fool would hesitate. Stand aside, and let me finish my work. I will be responsible to Sanchez when he returns."

"No doubt," responded Ursola, dryly.

"Perhaps it may be part of thy scheme to meet him with the saber drawn; or with some of thy thieves in ambush. Having gone this far I can well believe that there is little that thou wouldst stop at. Return the prisoners to their

apartment, make all as it was found, and then follow me. I have a fancy to put thee in the same plight—until Sanchez returns. If he fathers not the idea I will owe thee my apologies, and will not be slow in giving them."

"And if I refuse?"

Then the compact thou hast made with us is broken; we have no use for thee; and thou must die."

Hard and cold was the voice of the woman and Roldan did not doubt that every word she uttered was most sternly meant. This was the woman to whom he had attempted but a short time ago to make love. Truly, his wooing had not prospered; and here his pride must have another tremendous fall. He looked covertly about him, but saw no way of escape. The light shone fairly on his breast, and the barrel of the pistol never wavered. His mind was speedily made up.

"It will be death to this man, for whom I am sure that Sanchez hath certain uses; but settle that with him. I wash my hands of it all. Watch the girl that she does nothing desperate, and I will help him back to his dungeon."

In good faith he made a movement to carry out his offer; and had there been no interference the chain would have been again on the wrist of the judge, and father and daughter would have been left to crouch in the darkness.

But this was the time when Gilt-Edge Jack thought it best to interfere. His presence had not been suspected, and he came like a thunderbolt. With his left hand he wrenched the revolver from the fingers of Ursola, while his right arm swung around her waist, and then gave a toss which flung her within the cell in front of which she was standing.

The next instant he had struck out with his right, and dropped Roldan before the outlaw had time to understand what was coming. He fell at the feet of Ursola, who had just risen, and the stumble that she gave caused her to be too late to reach the door before it was clanged to in her face. The bolt was shot by its spring just as her hand touched the door, and the two were prisoners.

Atherton listened, but there was no sound from within. The man was as yet too nearly stunned to make any outcry; and Ursola was not of the kind to waste breath in either threats or prayers when it was certain that both would be useless.

The lantern had dropped from the hand of Ursola, but was still burning. Jack snatched it up, well knowing its importance. Then he looked at the father and daughter, who had staggered back against the wall, and were stupidly staring at him, unable to comprehend the change in the position.

"Rough on the Daisy; but if he is still in the land of the living I reckon he will have to wait again while I get these two innocents out of their hobble. Guess you remember me, Miss Janvrin. I don't know any more about this interesting catacomb than you do, if as much; but it strikes me that we had better be moving in some direction or other. We can't make it much worse, and if my luck runs about up to the average it can be hoped that we will make it somewhat better."

"Oh, yes, I remember you. He said that you were coming, but I did not believe him. Perhaps he was truer than I thought, though he would have forced us back to that dungeon. Come! There is no time to spare. The fiend may know a way out; or some one may come to aid them. Let us go—anywhere so that it be where they cannot find us."

"All right. That's my platform exactly. You carry the lantern, and you want to freeze on to it without any let go about it. If that once drops we are gone up, sure. I'll give the old gentleman one arm, but I want my pistol hand free. If we should meet any one it will be safe to shoot on sight. The people here are all tarred with the same stick; and a very nasty one it is, too."

In default of anything better Jack determined to retrace his steps, keeping a sharp lookout by the way for some avenue of exit from the mine. Though he was as anxious as Morgiana to reach the outer air once more, he was afraid that they might have to do some hiding, and perhaps a little fighting, before they would be able to do that. He had left a large portion of his breakfast in the cell which he had been occupying, and thought that if he passed by that way he would secure the provisions. They might find a secure hiding-place; but he knew the danger of being starved out of it, and he wished to do his best, and put off that evil hour as long as possible.

Certain though he had been that he would be able to find his way he must have made a mistake at one of the angles of the passage, since he found no traces of the spot he had lately left, and finally came to a place where the corridor appeared to abruptly end.

At the same time he heard steps behind. They were still distant, but they were coming rapidly, and from the clatter Jack knew that there must be half a dozen men of the party. He could not go forward, and it was useless to attempt to go back. The only thing left was to brace himself for a fight.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WALLED IN ALIVE.

So far, during the flight, the judge had kept up much better than Jack would have hoped for had he seen him when found in his dungeon by Roldan. He had not uttered a word, and his grip upon the hand of the sport was like that of a drowning man, but he had kept step with comparative ease. Now, he seemed to once more collapse. He sunk upon the floor, in spite of the effort of his daughter to hold him up; and again from between his lips came the sound of the singular music which so closely imitated the notes of a violin.

"Best place for him, miss," said the sport, as he turned down the light of his lantern somewhat, and then proceeded to cover it with his coat, which he removed for the purpose.

"If you could get him to lie down at full length, and then take your place alongside of him it might save trouble. You understand there is going to be a difficulty; and there is always a chance of stray bullets going to the spot where they will do the least good."

"I understand; but how shall I quiet him? That sound will draw them toward us."

"Do the best you can. It may be that they will pass by. The passage is a little wide, and I think there is another—"

He ceased speaking suddenly, and placed his hand warningly on the head of Morgiana, who was cowering by the side of her father. At the same time the judge ceased his music. They could still hear in the distance the sounds made by the approaching footsteps; but it seemed that they had heard something nearer.

"Hist! Who are you there?"

There was something familiar about the voice, low-toned though the words were spoken; yet Johnny hesitated to answer. What friends could he hope to meet with in these underground passages?

"If it is a friend to Guido, speak!" continued the same caustic, undertone.

"There is little time to waste. It may be that I have come to save thee."

"Hello! It is the dumb man, back again. All right! I am a friend to most any one who will help us out of the scrape; or even take the dead-wood out of the alley. War has been declared and you can hear the advance guard of the enemy. What is your game?"

"To return good for good. You helped me out of the dungeon beneath the ranch; I can help thee out of as bad a prison here. This way, and be swift."

"As swift as I can be with a back load of idiot, and a lady on the verge of death by starvation. Where are you?"

Atherton had stooped and picked up the judge. Imprisonment and scant food had been doing their work, and Janvrin was little more than skin and bone, yet he was rather an awkward weight for him to handle, to say nothing of his being hampered somewhat by Morgiana, who clung to one of her father's hands.

For answer Guido cautiously opened the slide of his lantern, though without allowing more than a little gleam of light to escape.

But that was sufficient for Jack to perceive that there was a narrow, lateral passage, in which stood the man with whom he had been speaking. Beyond him was a cloaked figure which he could not so clearly make out.

There was no doubt about the man with the lantern being Guido, and in him Atherton had confidence. No matter who was the companion, it was safer to follow than to remain there; and the pursuers were too near to admit of any effort at further explanation. Jack stepped out, bearing the judge on his shoulder, and with Morgiana at his side.

"Follow me closely," whispered back Guido.

"The way is still open, and we can baffle them yet. It was better fortune than I had hoped for to meet thee at the very outset. I had feared for thy life, since, from the time that I was left bleeding upon the floor, I could learn nothing of thee. There will be a reckoning yet."

"Most likely; and the only question is, who will come out the creditor. They were thrown out a little; but I think they are coming hot-footed again. If there is any stomach about you for a fight I fancy it will not have an empty void for very long. Unless you can bring us quickly to a spot where there is a better chance to drop half a dozen before some one drops me I think I will turn, have it out with them, and be done with it."

"Wait! Wait! It is but a little further, and then the advantage will be on our side. So they take us not in the rear I care not if there be a dozen. They can come at us but one at a time."

The companion of Guido had not waited, but gliding on had already gained so far upon the rest as to be out of sight and hearing, and a strange suspicion at that moment darted across the mind of the sport. He said nothing, however; but shut his teeth hard, and staggered grimly on. He found that his underground life had taken something of the steel out of his endurance, and that the weight across his shoulder was one that he could bear but a little longer.

"All right," he muttered.

"Guess they will say something before they begin to shoot; and when they call I'll be apt to

show my hand, a sight heavier than they are looking for it to be. If I could get the girl out of the range of the bullets I wouldn't care how soon the sport began."

A low exclamation of satisfaction from the lips of Guido caused him to cease his reflections and look anxiously ahead.

Guido stooped, and at the same time opened further the slide of his lantern.

The movement showed a still narrower opening ahead, through which the companion of Guido was just passing.

"Go on! Take thy burden through as carefully as may be, though it will be something of a squeeze, even if it is possible. I will bring up the rear."

"Scarcely," retorted the sport.

"The post of honor belongs to your humble servant. It might be that we would fail to all get through; and then, what would I do with my imbecile? Lead the way, and if anything turns up drag him off. They are perilously near; and I may have to open fire to cover your retreat. It will be all the better if you are out of range of bullets."

There was no time to argue the question; and Johnny spoke as though he meant to be obeyed. Guido slipped into the opening, and was out of sight in an instant, leaving the rest in darkness.

"Your turn next, Miss Janvrin."

"Yes, follow closely," answered the girl at his side, and Jack hesitated no longer.

"Beware of the step, it is downward!" called back Guido, just in time. Gathering the judge closer in his arms, Atherton barely saved himself a fall, and before he had fairly recovered himself he had stumbled out into the night of the upper world.

As he came there was a cry from a dozen voices behind him, and a crash.

"Show a light here! The girl! Where is she?"

The sounds gave Atherton the suspicion that something had gone amiss, and as he spoke he dropped the judge from his arms, and turned toward the passage through which he had just emerged.

He was met by the solid rock; and there was no more noise of pursuit to be heard from the other side.

"She is sacrificing herself," he continued, as he threw himself against the spot where the door should be.

"Quick! Open this and let me get among them before it is too late."

"It is too late already," responded Guido, with his shoulder also against the rock.

"It closes with a spring, and is locked from the other side. The girl must have been bent on securing the escape of her father, and has shut herself in. If they know not the secret of the spring they cannot follow. Perhaps, even, they will not find her. She may be safely enough walled up in the narrow part of the passage. There is a double door, and when the one is closed the other shuts with it."

Guido spoke low. About the horror in his voice there could be no doubt.

"Why, this is worse than that from which she was rescued! She is in there, and alone. Perhaps, though, she halted at the inner door, and came no further."

"Would that I could think so; but it could not be. That door she could not close unless she was on this side of it."

"But, think, man! Is there no way to open the passage; to roll back this accursed stone?"

"Not from the outside. The spring moves only from within; and I had left it back when I passed out. She has closed it."

"How, then, is she to be saved? Satan himself would not leave her there, to go mad in the darkness."

"There is no way, except for me to reach her through the regular entrance—which you may be sure will be well guarded after this. If I can steal through I can save her; but it will take hours—and perhaps days."

The sport uttered a groan.

"It is almost the first time I ever trusted to the wits of another rather than to my own; and you can set it down as a fact that it will be the last time. It was not your fault, however, so you need not look so guilt-stricken. If you know any place where we can stow poor Janvrin, so that he can have a chance to rest, build up, and be out of the way, we had better take him to it. After that, we can attend to the business in hand without being quite so much clogged. Perhaps your companion will be content to mount guard over him, provided he is one whom you will guarantee we can trust."

"Little doubt of that, since that same companion is not unknown to thee, and has been anxious enough to come to the rescue. If we can but get him away without outcry, and too much trouble, I think he can be both hidden and cared for."

"Enough then. Let us leave the spot. It is as I suspected from the glimpse I had. Thy companion is a woman."

"A woman who has come with men at her back to the rescue. There may not be force enough to attack the outlaws in their den; but

with thee to aid them they could hold Roldan at bay; and I doubt if his men would care to advance to the attack, where there would be all hard knocks, and no plunder."

"And I am not so sure that same lady does not require a little watching on her own account. For how long has she been with thee?"

In a low tone Jack muttered his suspicion; and promptly Guido responded, though he could not guess what it was that was in the mind of the sport.

"We left the ranch together, and she has not been from my side save for a few moments, when I left her, to see that the coast was clear, before venturing into the passage."

"It is Donna Eleena, then, beyond a doubt?"

"No prophet does it require one to have been to have guessed that much. What I told thee must have been a mistake, though I believed when I spoke. I visited the ranch with no friendly purpose. Hesitate no longer, since I can swear to thee that she is a friend."

"So I could swear myself, were it not for a certain suspicion that in some way thou hast been hoodwinked. A very pretty scheme it would be, and thou hast given away the secret of the rock and the passage. Well, we trust as far as we can; and after that, it will all depend. I have had time enough to rest after the excitement, and can struggle with the judge for a little. Give us more light, and be ready to lend a hand if need be. With him across my shoulder I will not be as active on the draw as usual, and if we meet any one it will not be a friend."

"Unless it be the lady of the ranch. She seemed to be shy of thy coming, and while we were talking she hath vanished. It was not safe for her to try the path alone, but so long as she keeps her shoulder to the rock she will hardly come to harm."

"Provided it be the right shoulder, of course. I am a little suspicious of these sudden conversions, and if it should turn out that she knew the way better than either of us I would not be surprised. In fact, Guido, I am not so sure of you, yourself, as I have been, and I warn you that there will be no trifling. I shoot first, and caution afterward when I am on a trail as dark and dangerous as this seems to be."

"And so destroy the last hope of the girl within the passage to the mines. Think twice before you make such reward to the man who has risked much to serve thee."

"Let it go at that for the present. Lead out!"

The sport had been in no great haste to move, hoping that the judge would so far recover as to be able to help himself somewhat; but there seemed to be no chance of that, and so, with the body once more over his shoulder, he followed in the wake of Guido, who led the way slowly, and looking to this side and that in search of any trace of the missing Eleena.

CHAPTER XXIX.

SANCHEZ SETS THINGS STRAIGHT.

FOR a little while Roldan was so stunned that he did not realize his position, or hazard a guess at what had befallen him. The blow of the sport had been a heavy one, and when he fell he lay like a log. Even when his eyes opened, and he had staggered to his feet he stared around, expecting to see something of the prisoners, at the very least; and he passed his hand over his eyes to clear away the mist which he thought had gathered over them.

When he found that he saw no better than before, he staggered forward until he came against the stone door; and then for the first time understood that he was within the dungeon from which he had lately removed the prisoners.

Had Ursola fired the shot that she had been threatening? And had he been thrown in there to die?

He drew himself up, felt his breast, and his head; but there was no wound. A spot on which he placed his hand several times to make sure was slightly abraded, and he felt a dull pain; but no bullet had struck him there, and he began to have some suspicion of the truth. He had been felled by a blow.

But who did it? and why? Where was Ursola, and where the prisoners? He called her name, but there was no answer. For all he knew he might be abandoned there, to starvation and death. After what he had seen the idea was not an unlikely one; and it filled him with a horrid fear. He shouted, raved, beat against the door, vowed that he would never do another good action as long as he lived, and finally sunk down on the very bench which the judge had occupied, and was silent.

When he had given up all hope he heard a sound outside; and then the door opened, allowing a gleam of light to enter from the passage without.

He sprung to his feet and darted forward, intending to make his exit without delay; but on the threshold was confronted by Sanchez, a drawn sword in his hand.

"What means this?" asked Sanchez, seemingly taken back at the sight of the Don.

"How does it come that thou art here—and where are the prisoners? Answer, and be quick

about it. The man who plays tricks with me has not often the chance to laugh long."

The question was one that Roldan would have preferred not to answer until he had time to weigh his words; but Sanchez was in no humor to wait, and at an angry exclamation the Don began his story by stating that he had visited the prisoners, and found that unless they were moved at once the death of one if not both would soon occur. After that he gave the literal truth, which served as well as any falsehood that he could think of. Only one variation did he allow himself to make, and that was in regard to his attempt to overawe Ursola. Instead of saying that, he claimed that he had at once bowed to her decision. He was in the act of assisting the judge back to his cell when the cyclone struck him.

The Don nodded grimly as he listened; and at the close did not seem as much angered as Roldan had feared that he would be.

"What then became of my sister?" he asked.

"Is she within the cell also?"

"Scarcely, or she would have returned some answer, since I was not the most quiet of prisoners when I came to my senses. Unless she was killed outright, which I hardly think possible, it is more than likely that she made good her escape while the villains, whoever they were, assaulted me. We can look."

"Unless badly hurt she would not remain there a moment longer than she chose. She knows the secrets of the mines as well as we. We may look, however."

But there was no sign of Ursola there; and as Roldan knew nothing of what had happened after he had received the blow which struck him down, her disappearance was no such matter of astonishment as it would have been had he known that the bolt had been shot on her as well as on himself.

"Trust her to take care of herself," said Sanchez, when they had glanced around the apartment.

"Probably she has been on the track of the intruders, whoever they may have been; and that was why I met her not on my return. We will go in search of them. It is not likely that they can get beyond the confines of the mine; and if they starve in some rat-hole, so much the better. It will save the trouble of extinguishing them."

"But, who then was it, who struck me the blow? At first I thought that thy sister had pressed too hard on the trigger; but when I found no wound, and felt this same ache in my head that is there now, I knew that I had been stricken down from behind. Who could have given me the blow?"

"Perhaps the blow did not come from behind. Ursola has a knack of her own about such things, and it may be that thy story has been colored to suit thy side of the affair. Or, it may be that the American of whom we have spoken has come on the stage, and taken a part. It would be like to his work. What he does is done thoroughly. I would sooner have had him for a friend than an enemy; but if he has chosen to declare war, on his own head must rest the consequences. Come! We must find out what has really happened. Of course, I am not without some concern lest evil may have befallen Ursola."

At mention of the American the Don started. He remembered the seeming Indian who had bested him in the duel with sabers. He had no means of knowing whether or not he was at the beck of Ursola; but he was ready to believe that Pedro and the sport were one. Perhaps, too, he had followed, and again taken a hand in. It might have been by his advice that he had been thrust into the dungeon, while the prisoners were removed to some other spot which might appear to be safer.

He said nothing of this suspicion, however, following Sanchez, until they had reached the guard-room at the mouth of the mine.

Then, as though he had not a suspicion of the good faith of the outlaw, he carelessly said:

"Best to give thy men an extra charge to be vigilant. It will do no harm if there is a hint that there are foes about, who may make an attack, or an effort to steal within the mine. Remember, it is thy neck that is in danger; and if we are ousted the loss will be thine more than mine. I can come again, with a force at my back to take mine own. But if this is known as thy retreat it might not be so easy for thee to carry out thy share of the bargain that we have made."

Sanchez was so evidently in earnest that Roldan took good care to obey, and even took the trouble to send special instructions to the outpost. He had just had a lesson, and so was more willing to accept a warning than he would have been a day before. From the way the Silent One had spoken he judged that there was no danger of an immediate rupture of their relations, and having had the first speech with him was willing to run the risk of Ursola's wrath. As far as he knew the Janvins had not been her prisoners, but her brother's.

While attending to this duty Sanchez remained calmly seated, daintily puffing at a cigarette, and evincing no haste to search for the missing woman. When Roldan returned to him, as he

did when he saw that he was waited for, Sanchez rose up slowly.

"We will visit Ursola, now. She may be able to give us the information I confess I am curious to get. If we find her not it will be a sign that the prisoners have really escaped, and are somewhere in hiding. We will look for them, then; though, if we find them not for a week or so, it is no great matter."

"Yet, if they have with them that American it might be as well to go with a force that will make him see the folly of resistance. He may be one of those desperate devils who hesitate not unless the odds are at least a dozen to one."

"What difference? If he attempts resistance, cut him down. I withdraw my request to touch him lightly if he be found with either father or daughter. Yet, it is more than likely he will be far enough away by this."

Roldan was not sure in his own mind whether the request would have made him hesitate heretofore, or if it was conferring a special favor to withdraw it now. If Pedro was the American, as he had reason to believe, he had already tried cutting him down, and the operation had not been a success.

He did not care to admit this, however, and strode along by the side of his companion as though he had no troublesome thoughts.

Back by the passage through which Roldan had gone not so very long before, went the two, until they came to the room in which the combat had taken place. There was no sign of any Ursola there, and Roldan noted that the door through which the Indian had entered was closed, and once more invisible.

"We waste time in looking for her," said Sanchez, when he had called softly, and for several times, the name of his sister.

"No doubt she will turn up at her own good time and pleasure. There is a chance that we find her and the prisoners at the further end—a spot where thou hast never been. We will search it. If we have no reward for the search, it will be time to think of calling for thy men to go through the passages, and look into the mine."

Without more ado he hastened away, seeming to become somewhat excited, and in a brief time was threading the same corridor by which Jack had retreated, finally coming to the end of the passage.

There was nothing before them but the solid wall, yet Roldan knew well enough how appearances had deceived him, and was not surprised at seeing Sanchez stoop and examine the different rocks out of which that section of the wall was built.

Finally he gave a gesture of satisfaction, looked again narrowly, and then applied his hand to the corner of one of the stones.

Whether it was a spring that was being pressed upon, or whether it was the stone itself, Roldan could not see; but the rock which barred this end of the narrower passage to the outside world moved aside, revealing the opening behind.

"Ah!" said Sanchez, holding up his light.

"Here is the nest; now, let us see how many of the birds are at home."

Cowering in the passage, at the foot of the step, was Morgiana.

"Ah! the flower of the flock; otherwise, the one little lamb. Come forth! We have found the best of the lot; perhaps the rest are not far off."

Without hesitation or visible reluctance, the girl came crouching out from her place of confinement. When she reached the higher corridor she drew herself up, and looked boldly in the face of Sanchez.

"Search the spot if you choose, but you will find nothing. You are too late. Thank Heaven! my father is beyond your reach. Through him you had the power to make my heart bleed; but now that he is safe I fear you not. Do your worst. I defy you!"

CHAPTER XXX.

DOOMED.

ALTHOUGH the words of Guido had somewhat reassured the sport, he was not altogether satisfied in his own mind that there was not a mistake somewhere. As he had but passing glimpses of a muffled figure, which really corresponded in height and proportion with that of Eleena, it argued well for the keen eyesight and judgment of Gilt-Edge Johnny that he should have had his suspicion. Eleena it certainly was not.

Guido left her standing alone in the darkness, while he went forward to see if the way through the rock was still open and unwatched. He was not long absent, and when he returned there was some one standing where he had left the Donna; but it was not the lady he had left there, since she was already far on her way down the trail; and she was not going of her own volition, either.

The eyes of Eleena had become accustomed to the darkness, which, of course, was not intense, like that within the mine. When she had stood for some little time, waiting nervously for the return of her guide, she saw, indistinctly, a figure moving toward her, which she took to be that of Guido.

It was not Guido, by any means. When quite near she gave an interrogatory "Well?"

For answer a strong arm shot out, seizing her by the waist, while a broad palm was clapped over her mouth.

"It is well," uttered a not unmusical voice.

"For once thou art caught off guard, and there is now the chance to see whether thou art flesh and blood, such as other women are made of. It hath taken patient waiting; but certain it was that it would come at last. To struggle is useless, for it will but make thy pretty neck the sooner wrung. No cry can help thee now, so that it will be as well to accept thy fate in silence."

The truth of this was apparent enough, since the hand over her mouth prevented the slightest sound from leaving her lips, while the arm around her waist might have been made of steel, so firm was its clasp. She felt something of the benumbing influence that the cat exercises on the mouse when he has it safely in its grasp. She neither struggled, moved, nor attempted to utter a sound; and had it not been that he could feel that she had the strength to stand if he withdrew his arm, her captor might have thought that she had fainted.

He gave no further caution, however; and seemed to care but little whether or not she accepted what he had already given her. He raised her from the ground, freeing her mouth as he did so, and moved away with a mighty stride, that told how little he felt the weight, that, to some men, would have been burdensome enough.

He was at home on this trail, too. He stepped with as much freedom as Guido had done, and for a time followed the same course.

Then, he branched off into a canyon, finally halting, and proceeding deliberately to bind her hands together, and lash her to a convenient tree.

So far Eleena had accepted her capture in silence. She had a courage that it was hard to daunt; and after the first shock was over was willing to bide her time, rather than waste breath and strength in vain struggles and supplications. If he thought that she was overwhelmed by the misfortune which had overtaken her it might prove so much the better for her in the end.

"Remain there, for the present, until I see whether there were any who followed. It can be made all the worse for thee and for them. Be patient. I will return before long. And thou wilt not be alone for many moments. I will send one to guard thee."

With these words her captor went away, leaving her a prey to suspense and wonder. What was to be her fate? Why had she been brought hither? She had at last discovered that her captor was an Indian; and from that moment was almost certain that he had no connection with Roldan; and that more than likely he was an enemy, both to him and to the dwellers in the ranch of the Golden Dream. She began to hope that there was pursuit. She would rather fall into the hands of the outlaw than to run the risks with the red-man.

Before very long she heard a cautious footstep, approaching the spot, but it turned out to be the guard of whom the other had spoken. This man crept up almost to her side, and threw himself down without a word. His low breathing came now and then to her ears, otherwise she might have thought that she was still alone.

The cords cut into her flesh, somewhat, and the position in which she stood was by no means comfortable, to say the least; but she uttered no complaint, well knowing that to any one but the chief appeals would be in vain.

Although she might have imagined that the absence of her captor had lasted for an hour or more, not more than a quarter of one had elapsed before he returned, and this time he brought with him a little following, which dropped aside to take position by the guard.

The chief turned to Eleena, at once, and began to loosen the cords which bound her. He was grimly silent, and did not seem to care to spare her the pain which his rough handling was causing.

Eleena thought it was time to make one effort.

"If thou hast taken me because thou hast thought that I was one of the men who are working in the mines beyond, thou hast made a mistake. Roldan and his rovers are enemies of mine, as no doubt they are of thine, and I was spying upon them with no friendly motive. It might be to thy interest to make friends with me. I can reward or aid a friend; and my arm is fairly long to punish those who may try to harm me."

"What is Roldan, the outlaw, to the Feather who Talks? It is true that he has worked evil for the men of our tribe who have fallen into his clutches; but one day we will pay him for that. It is because I knew thee as the mistress of the Ranch Accursed that I carried thee hither. We have been long waiting for thee, but now the retribution that will reach thee will be more swift than pleasant. Would that there were more here to see it; but it may not be safe to delay. Who can tell what witchcraft thou mightest work?"

"There is surely some great mistake here," answered Eleena, shocked at the cold cruelty that was in his tone.

"No harm have I done to thee and thy tribe, save, perhaps, to guard my own. Until the stampede of the other day there has been no trouble between thy tribe and the people of the ranch; and even then I but tried to stop my herd. Had I known that the attack was coming I would have sooner kept the cattle where they could not be reached, or made a present to thee of the finest, than have had the peace broken. If my men fought thee, it was but natural, and they did it, too, without orders."

"Thou art mistaken again. Talking Feather is not a cattle-thief, and no man of his tribe joined in the stampede. It is not worth thy while to plead with him for mercy, since thou hast been already tried and condemned. There is nothing left for thee but to suffer the punishment of thy crimes. And for the witch there is nothing but the fire, when the reckoning comes. Not here, or now; but at daybreak. That much time thou hast. Make thy peace, then, as thou goest along, for when we halt again the end will be not far off."

Very slowly and deliberately did the Talking Feather speak; but that only made him the more impressive. The Donna felt that no words of hers could turn him from his purpose; and that unless aid came from some quarter or other she was lost.

The journey that followed was not long; but it was toilsome, since it had to be taken on foot, and Eleena was already well fatigued with the ride of the day before, and the walk of the night, to say nothing of the exhaustion that came from the threatened torture and death. She did not intend to neglect giving a last appeal; but thought it better to wait for the supreme moment, when she knew that her only hope hung on that single effort. At what precise moment her strength gave out she never knew, since she struggled along with grim determination until she dropped. The rest of the way she must have been carried, but she was not aware of the fact. When she again revived the journey was over, and she was reclining on a pile of boughs and leaves, over which a blanket had been spread. Grimly motionless, two guards sat, one on either side of her, while at a little distance, a number of other men were busily engaged in arranging a heap of fagots in an ominous manner. In the east there was the first sprinkling of the coming dawn. If the threat of the Talking Feather was delivered in earnest, as it certainly seemed to have been, she had not, at the most, more than an hour to live.

At the sight she started up, feeble as she was; and would have attempted to dash away, had not a restraining hand dropped at once upon her shoulder. At the same time she heard a savage grunt, which had its meaning, even if there was no spoken word. It simply told her that she was powerless to help herself, anyhow; and that if she did not keep quiet it would be the worse for her.

She allowed herself to sink back, but turning her head watched the preparations that were being made with breathless eagerness, waiting for the Feather who Talks to come near. She was horribly frightened, now; and yet managed to preserve a semblance of courage. If she once lost that there would be no hope remaining. Empty babblings, or inane appeals for mercy, would only provoke the laughter of these savages.

As she watched the day broke.

As though that was the signal, Talking Feather stepped toward his prisoner.

CHAPTER XXXI.

SAVED AT THE STAKE.

If Talking Feather had a certain amount of education, there lay behind it all the cruelty and superstition of his race. Contact with the whites had only enlightened him sufficiently to throw into strong relief the darker traits of his character. Here would have been a fit theme for the pencil of an artist.

The pyre was prepared, and the victim was ready. Talking Feather stood by the side of the heap of dry wood, a torch in his hand, while two of his men dragged forward the unresisting woman, whose only effort was to reach the ears that were deaf to all that she might say.

Yet, careless as they seemed as to her words, every one of these was heard plainly enough; and perhaps there was a disappointment and a warning in them. So far, her courage had not been broken, and she had not begged for mercy. She had only asked for justice. When persons do that there is either some strength in their case, or they have reason to look for ultimate release if they can gain time. So it seemed to Talking Feather. He made an impatient gesture, ordering haste.

The command was obeyed by the two to whom it was given. With more speed than dignity Eleena was hurried to the pile; and just at its edge, at another gesture, she was halted, for a last word from the chief.

"It is not the first time that those who have suffered have tried to break the curse; but they had not the faith in fire, which alone can do the work. All words are of no good. Here is the end of the witches who have lived and sinned in the Ranch of the Golden Dream."

"All right, Talking Feather; but ain't you a little too soon with your remarks. Just hold on till we can talk the matter over a bit. You want to be sure you are right; and then you can wagon on at as rapid a gait as you want to."

The Gilt-Edge Sport had proved himself a better Indian than any of them, since he had succeeded in stalking them down, and appearing in the midst of the party without his presence being suspected until he spoke.

He was still in the garb of Pedro, the Indian; but he knew that his speech would betray that he was in disguise. Talking Feather alone could speak so fluently in the tongue that was not his own, and he not so glibly. In the chief he had confidence; but he was not so sure of the rest, and so, when he came, it was with his revolvers ready to his hand.

There was a low shout of angry surprise, as the Indians turned on the intruder. In spite of his disguise they would have flung themselves at him had it not been for the Feather who Talks.

The latter recognized the tones at once, and turning, advanced with extended hand.

"How!"

After the same fashion the sport responded:

"How!"

"Glad to see that your memory has nothing defective about it, because I was most wofully afraid I would have to leave some cases for the coroner if I interfered with your diversions. That would have been a mistake, you understand; but it would have been the best I could do. When I chip on another man's game, it is no sign that I am willing to go over the river. If it is all the same to you, would you mind telling me what is going on here; together with a few of the particulars in regard to where you found this lady? I have a big interest in it; and it looks barely possible that there has been the biggest kind of a mistake."

"When his white brother saved the life of the Feather who Talks, it gave him the right to ask questions of him, or of the witch. But she will not speak to save her life. And if she did, only the fire could bring the truth from her lips. Question me, though; or speak with her. The sacrifice can wait."

"So I should judge," dryly responded the sport, thinking of the weapons he had ready to train on the party in case they were not open to his reasoning.

"But first, a word about where and when the lady was picked up. Her face, just now, looks very familiar; but I swear I can't exactly place it. If Guido told the truth, there is a mistake somewhere."

Briefly, the Talking Feather explained that he had been keeping an eye on the men of the mine, partly on account of having heard nothing of the sport from the time he had left the hut in disguise, and partly on account of his own affairs.

By the route which he had thought known only to himself and his tribe, two persons had approached the spot where he had been lying in wait, with a half-formed purpose of entering the mine, in quest of information from some of his men who were there.

In one he recognized the lady of the ranch, in spite of the dim view he had of her. When her companion departed he saw his opportunity, and could wait no longer. He stole behind, seized her without allowing a chance for resistance or outcry, and carried her away to a safe place. Then he went back, both to discover whether there was any danger of being followed, and to gather together his companions. With the exception of one man, whom they left watching the outlet to the caves of the mine, they had come thither, deciding on the fate of the woman as they moved along. Death by fire had been voted by all; and it was that sentence they were about to carry out when they were interrupted by the appearance of the sport.

"All correct, and very amiable; but there is a hitch in the affair," remarked Johnny, when he had listened to the story.

"I don't know how it comes, but I am sure that you have hold of the wrong woman—and I didn't think so, either, until I heard your yarn. I don't take much stock in witchcraft, and all that anyhow; and as for burning a lady at the stake because she happens to reside in a house that has had a bad name, I can't allow it; I really can't."

"She hath bewitched thee, too, my friend," said Talking Feather, more in sadness than in anger.

"Prove to us that this is not the vampire of the Golden Dream and we leave her in thy hands to treat as it may seem fit."

"Unless Guido has been a most statuesque liar she is the lady of the Golden Dream, sure enough; but being the vampire is quite another thing. I have my suspicions; but till I am a little more certain I do not care to ventilate them. Certain it is that she had nothing to do with the predicament in which I found you, for I know well enough that I had left her at the ranch. I heard what she was trying to make you believe, and I must say it sounded much like the truth. Suppose you let this prisoner go on bail. In case we find that I have been making a blunder I pledge you my word to

put her back in your hands as secure as she is now."

"And if you don't agree," added Johnny to himself, in an undertone, "I guess we will have to fight; though it would look a good deal like murder to open out on you now."

He made a mistake when he doubted the extent of the gratitude of the chief. No doubt he seemed to be asking a great deal, for the Feather who Talks was by no means convinced; but none the less did the Indian give over his present intention with cheerful alacrity.

"It shall be so. My friend speaks like a man who knows, and though he must be wrong, yet to show that Talking Feather has not forgotten, he leaves her in thy hands. For the present, farewell."

It had not been in his plan to part company so soon with the chief, yet Jack understood that he meant to intimate that it would be impossible to remain near the spot if Eleena was suffered to live, and so did not attempt to prevent his departure. He accepted the hand of the chief once more, and then saw him stride off, followed by his obedient braves. It might be that this was only a ruse, but it looked like the sure-enough thing; and in a moment or two Jack and the Donna had the field to themselves.

Up to the last moment the guards did not relax their vigilance, and Eleena had not thought it prudent to make a movement that might call their attention, or that of their chief, to herself. She was ready to talk when it was the proper time; but she understood that there is sometimes great dignity in silence. Now, she remained as silent as before."

"Appears that the trouble has subsided for the present; but what to do next I am not so certain. There never was such a fellow to accumulate white elephants as your humble servant. I couldn't help but chip in; but really, I had my hands full already. If you have nothing better to do perhaps you had better go along with me, though I warn you that our establishment has hardly the comfort to offer that you are accustomed to in the Golden Dream."

Atherton spoke after his free and easy manner; but he had a special object in his mind or he might have been more dignified in the presence of the lady of the ranch. He could understand the mental strain to which she had been lately subjected, and that it would not take much to bring on a collapse. He wanted no scene; and as he had said, he already had enough on his hands, without being troubled with a fainting woman, however handsome she might be.

He was agreeably surprised to hear how com-posedly the Donna could speak.

"Thanks, my friend. You have again done me a service for which I must for the present remain your debtor. But believe my word when I say that some day the debt shall be canceled. I was very near to death when you came, and I would be wickedly selfish if I were to demand more of your time than you have given me. Though it may take hours, I am not afraid to find my way to my friends alone, if it seems best to you; or I can go with you as you suggest, if I will not be too much of an incumbrance. I am in your hands; dispose of me as it seems best for your interests."

"Better go along, though I have been thinking what effect you might have on my patient if I find him with his eyes open, and his crazy cap on. Perhaps it would be as well to try it and see. There is a heap of nonsense in the foreground that it is about time was swept away."

To prevent any further allusion to his late service Jack turned abruptly, making a motion to follow as he did so.

Eleena obeyed, angered a little, perhaps, but with the air of one who did not intend to be left behind. In spite of all she had undergone in the last twenty-four hours she still had reserves of strength to call on, and showed little of the weakness that might have been expected.

It was not a long journey on which Jack led her. In less than ten minutes they came to the camp where he had left Janvrin under the care of Guido.

The judge was still there, looking as though he could not well go anywhere else without being carried; but Guido had disappeared.

"Well, I swear!" exclaimed Jack, as he took in the situation of affairs.

"He comes handy to have around at a pinch, now and then; but for a regular nurse he don't pan out worth a cent. If this is the way he watches a patient I don't want him to watch with me, when I am to take my medicine regularly. Where has he gone to; and what took him off?"

The words of the sport seemed to arouse Janvrin. He raised himself to a sitting posture, and stared feebly around until his eyes fell upon Eleena.

The first movement was something of a surprise; but the next took away the breath of the sport.

The strength of the judge came back to him on the instant, and he bounded to his feet.

"Ah, hah! There you are again! This time there shall be no mistake. I thought I slew you once; but the vampire is hard to kill. I must strangle the life out of her now, or she will go on to wreck more lives, and kill."

His maimed arm hung limply by his side; but the other hand shot out with a fierce snatch at the throat of Eleena.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JACK RETURNS TO HIS OLD QUARTERS.

"GENTLY, gently," said the sport, lightly raising his hand to thrust aside that of the judge.

"From the little I have heard, and the great deal I have suspected, you ought to be able to speak the truth in this matter; and the disappearance of Guido has a suspicious look. All the same, I can inform you that you are under a delusion. There are no such things as vampires, and I will believe in witches when I see them. This is a lady who has put herself to much danger and some trouble to help us, and that is not the way to return thanks."

The judge might have been a child, so softly did the sport speak to him, and with such an air of amused good nature.

The effect was instantaneous.

The angry glare left Janvrin's eyes, and he pitched forward on his knees, laughing and crying together, while he sobbed out something about being so glad, since he could now go back without fear of being hung.

"Glad to hear you say so; and I only hope that you know how you are to get there; and will take us along. This flash in the pan will soon be over, and then, unless Guido comes back, I would like to know how we are to tote you around to the camp of this lady, where we had planned to take you when morning dawned. Pity you hadn't stayed there in the first place. Then I wouldn't have been wasting my time on the Janvrins instead of looking after the Daisy. I swear, it makes me shiver when I think what may have happened to him."

"Best to save those shivers until thou hast thought well over thine own case. Hands up; or fall!"

The interruption came with all the thrill of a surprise, for the voice was that of Sanchez, and it distinctly told that its owner meant business. For once the surpriser had been surprised.

At the sound Jack's hands dropped for his pistols—but they did not rise again. He had taken in the situation at a glance, and saw that there were half a dozen barrels trained on him at such short range as to render a miss impossible in case the itching fingers tightened on the triggers.

"Excuse me, my friend, for not being rash; but when I know that you hold a natural in your hand what would be the sense of my going alone against you, with neither ace, face nor trump in mine. Count up your game and go on to the next deal."

He had not so entirely given up the game; but he lounged easily back, with a smile on his face, and looked at Sanchez with just as friendly a glance as he had given when together they came out of the mess of the great stampede.

"Glad am I to see that thou hast the sense to perceive when the game is against thee, since I feared thy rashness would lead thee to take a stand so that thy death must be a matter of course. And it may be that we are not done with thee yet; even in spite of the treachery to those who would have been thy best friends. Thy old quarters are ready for thee; and this idiot must go along, even though we have to carry him."

"All right. I am open for a bargain any day in the year, as long as it's not to go back on the pards I have already. Good wages, and plenty to do, will take me every time; though you can't hire me to shoot a man in the back, or knock a woman down. Your work is kind of bleaching on the complexion, and not altogether the best thing on the nerves; but if you can stand it I guess I can."

"More of that anon. For the present, hand over thy pistols, and follow thy leader."

The drop was still on the sport from every direction, but he never flinched as he coolly answered:

"I have no objection in the world to doing all the following that you ask for; but the men who get my revolvers have to take them. You ought to know that I never use them except when the occasion calls for them, so the safest thing that can be done will be to trust them right where they are, unless you mean a fight to the death, right here and now. But give a wink that way and the ball opens. You know whether I mean what I say or not, and can act accordingly."

It was a splendid bit of bluff—and it won. Jack might not have tried it had he not thought that Sanchez had more use for him alive than dead; but it was running a risk, since there might have been instructions to shoot him down on the first show of resistance, without waiting for further orders.

"Give me thy promise not to use them against us until thou art safely back in thy former quarters and we let it go at that."

At first Janvrin had not noted the interruption. He was groveling a little lower, his voice was a trifle weaker, but he still babbled on about the woman he had slain, and who now was alive again. He did not look able to comprehend the turn in affairs, and what was going on around him.

Yet, with one of those rapid changes that distinguished his condition, he ceased to speak, and gathering strength raised himself up until he could stare straight at Sanchez. In this position he remained silent until the close of his conversation with the sport. When Sanchez turned toward him the eyes of the two met.

Up sprung the judge.

"My daughter, villain! What have you done with her?"

Since the escape from the caverns of the mine, this was the first sign he had given that he remembered of the existence of Morgiana.

"Thy daughter is safe enough. We will take thee to her, and when both are strong enough, perhaps we will send you away together."

As word after word dropped from the lips of the speaker, Janvrin edged away toward the sport, and finally threw his arm over Atherton's shoulder, in a mute appeal for protection. That was all; but it told his terror more plainly than words could have done.

"That's all right, old man. Take it gently. I don't think you are going to be much worse off, anyhow; and I suspect that when this thing is all over you will be a heap easier in your mind. I felt all along that there must be something mean about leaving the young lady in the lurch, and now I know it. If there had not been we would never have been taken in again after this schoolboy fashion. Lean on me, and the procession will begin to move."

This left Eleena to herself. She had been standing as quietly as the rest, and perhaps with less alarm. She had less to fear, and if there was danger, it certainly was not as threateningly close as had been the torture-post of the Feather who Talks. Now, Sanchez turned to her with a courtly bow.

"Pardon me, my dear niece. I do not understand thy presence here, but of course it is a pleasure. As an honored guest, thy visit shall be made as agreeable to thee as our poor accommodations will allow, and when thou art ready an escort shall take thee to thy home. There are some things that we must speak of, but not before strangers, since they concern the family. If thou art tired, lean on my arm. The walking is none too good, and to ride we would require winged horses of the best training."

"My presence shall be explained soon enough, and, meantime, I am not too exhausted to follow thy lead. I have heard somewhat of these regions, and it is a gratification to know that I am to have the privilege of exploring them under thy guidance."

By daylight the way did not seem so long nor so tiresome as it had done the night before; and the prisoners of state reached the caverns without trouble, save Janvrin. With him exhausted nature could not rally for the effort, and he was carried the greater part of the way.

"It has all a meaning in it," thought Jack, as he looked around him, in his old quarters. "Blessed if I know what it is; but I think I can look a little further than I did when I left here, and see something of what is coming. Either this Sanchez is a remarkably knowing man; or else Ursola twisted the truth out of all recognition. He must have been all the time aware of the fact that I was here. Why did he not interfere? It may be that he has a warm side for the man who was in the stampede with him; or, as he has hinted, he may have some scheme in view. If the latter it is ten to one he wants to have me take the place of the Don when he gives him the grand bounce. Whether I will or not hardly requires a second thought. I am not sure that I would not sooner have the man straight up and down an enemy, for then I would know how to fight. This thing of having to keep the drop on a man that may be your best friend I always did despise. But I believe I would sooner be in my place than that of the Donna. And the Janvrins—if I can't see them through the ripple—will have the toughest time of all. Of course they have found the girl. Wonder if it would not be a good scheme for me to do some looking around. I might stumble across her myself, and get a hint of what the outlook is at the present time."

Atherton took his time to make these reflections. He knew that he was there as a prisoner rather than as a guest, and that it was quite likely that he was being watched; to say nothing of the fact that he had already spent more than one hour in the vain attempt to get out of these same quarters.

But he thought that he had learned something in regard to the secret of the mine, and that if he could only find it there was a way out from each dungeon. There were bolts that were turned by a secret spring, or moved by a certain pressure on some particular spot in the wall; and though he had not seen how its mechanism was worked he knew where to look for the secret door which led from the apartment in which he was confined.

"Night and day are about the same in this section of the earth, but as I have had my dinner, such as it was, I fancy there will be no visitors for some hours. Perhaps, as they have had time to settle down, I may as well begin my investigations now. I may stumble across my feminine friend; but if I do I don't think it will make a serious complication. Here goes."

He studied the wall where the doorway ap-

peared when Ursola called upon him to meet Roldan.

He felt carefully for a projection, and pressed here and there, or tested the crevices; but for a long time nothing rewarded his search. Then, when he was beginning to be disgusted with his want of success the opening appeared through which he had listened to the conversation which preceded his duel with Roldan.

He could distinctly hear two persons talking, though they spoke in a low tone; and he had no difficulty in recognizing the voices as belonging to Ursola and her brother.

"It matters not," came to his ears in the tones of Sanchez.

"I may be under obligations to him, but he is by thine own showing a dangerous man; and he must die."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A PRINCELY BRIBE.

"I AM not so sure of that," answered the other. "He is worth a dozen Roldans, and hath said that he hath his price. What is the poor satisfaction of a little vengeance, compared with gaining a friend such as he would make? Turn the Janvins loose, if that is the point he makes, and drop the rover into the oldest, worked-out shaft that can be found."

"Say no more. This is but folly. I would give a million if I could trust him—for he would be worth it—but I have known from the first that to do so would be death to us. He will be true to no one but himself; and not always that."

"I cannot believe it. Unless it be through the intrigues of Eleena. Of the two he is the rather to be trusted."

"Perhaps; but she would not be apt to harm us if she could, and we can protect ourselves from even a stronger hand than hers. When she knows that the man can never care for her she will be willing enough to give up this foolish quest, and return to her home, where, I swear, I never again will join her. Is this thing understood between us?"

"So far as the others are concerned, yes. But to the death of this man I consent not. It were a shame if he were slain at our hands. Best will it be to take time to think this over. Thy better judgment may show which is the true course to take."

"Oh, I am in no haste. He is safe enough now; and we can wait till the hour comes for him to die before we assist fate by giving the finishing touches. I only wanted to make it plain what I had decided on. It is too late for us to be of different minds, and I feared that if I spoke not soon there might be some rashness about thy intercourse with the man which would give him the chance to escape, and perhaps bring us evil."

Ursola was not convinced, but she did not appear willing to plead longer. So it seemed from some further words which she said, though the rest of the conversation was of but little importance, and lasted for but a few moments. After that there was silence in the adjoining apartment; and it seemed that one or both of the speakers had gone out.

"Once before I heard a conversation through the same crevice; and it was part of the scheme of lady Ursola that I should do so. Is this another of her games? She talks as though she was all for mercy; and Sanchez as though he was all for death. What is to come next? If I am worth a million why don't some one offer it to me? When I began to kick over the traces would be time enough to sign the death-warrant; and meantime I could be doing them no end of good. Verily, Johnny, I would not be surprised if the offer came from the lady before very long. If I am so valuable, Sanchez may go hang, brother though he be. The lady has not more love for him than the law allows; I can see that from the way they talk; and she might not object to dropping him in the same shaft she has suggested for Roldan. How long will I have to wait? If I thought it would be along soon I might possess my soul here a little longer in patience. I should hate to miss that interview."

It did not require any great shrewdness to guess that if Ursola had caused him to overhear that conversation it was for some such purposes as Jack hinted at in his soliloquy. She might think that if he knew how certainly Sanchez would deal him death so long as he handled the cards of the game he might understand how much it would be to his profit to turn to her as a friend.

And if that was her idea it was certain that before long she would take the opportunity to see what impression had been made on his mind. Perhaps it would be as well to try and meet her half-way.

Reasoning on this supposition Atherton applied himself to the consideration of the spot where he knew the secret door should be, and with such success that he thought he had discovered the mechanism, and acted accordingly.

The door yielded under his pressure, and without hesitation he entered the room.

As he had suspected, Ursola was there. She looked up at him with a bright glance, which

showed that she was neither alarmed nor surprised, and motioned him to a seat.

The sport was every whit as cool; and as he sunk down, he cast a glance around the room; for he had scarcely noted its furnishings at his previous visit.

It was a strange enough taste that led her to stay an hour longer than was necessary in this buried retreat, but Jack saw that she intended to be comfortable while she was here. Excepting sunlight, there was nothing wanting to make the spot the most habitable of places. In the Ranch of the Golden Dream there was nothing to equal this.

"Just dropped in to say that I overheard the conversation—as no doubt was intended—and it seems to me that Sanchez means business; and that you are my solid friend. In the general clean-up I will not forget that important fact. Of course, I am only waiting to see on which side my bread is buttered before striking in to the thick of the fracas, which I can see plainly enough is soon to come off."

"What use for thee to assume that boastful manner. Thou hast heard and seen enough to understand that it cannot deceive me. I know thee just as thou art, a man whom money could not buy so soon as the hope of some little adventure, and the stronger that same might be spiced with danger the better would it be relished. Yet, here the end of thy tether hath been reached, unless we choose to make it a little longer."

"Possibly; but it strikes me that you have as little regard for danger as I have ever yet shown, or you would not trust yourself with a man who has just heard his death-warrant read. I have my irons ready, and might as well have the fight out now as at any other time; and perhaps a little better. There might be certain advantages on my side that will not come again."

"If I have not read thee aright so much the worse for me. Thou art not a fool; and hast heard that there is a chance for a million as thy share. It is worth waiting for."

"Yes, if I was but sure that you had the will to throw it my way, and if I could forget that though I might make a better overseer than Roldan, when I had outlived my day of usefulness the old shaft would still be ready to receive me. If thou hast not kept faith with him, what hope would I have that I would fare better."

"The knowledge that Roldan was never my man; but one whom Sanchez chose for the work. Had he kept in his place, little would I have found to object to him; but thou hast heard how he would like to rule—and perhaps ruin. I want no more of him. And if Sanchez will not give him up, so much the worse for them both. What broader hint need I give thee? The wealth that is here belongs to me. Should I see fit to give thee half there is none to call thee or me to account."

"If Sanchez were gone. I have seen enough of him to know that he will not let go his grip without a fight for it—though, for the sake of my life, or that of my friends, I might be forced to strike him hard, yet it would be rather against my will. We have been in danger and bloodshed together, and though I am free to confess that to me he seems to be something of a villain, yet there is a warm side for him in my heart, nevertheless."

"Yet should he stand between thee and a million?"

"If it is a bargain that thou art offering I answer, yes. I am not the assassin of man or woman when there is money to be made by it. I have said it before, and I say it again: I fight to the last gasp for protection; but I slay not for coin. That means murder, and Gilt-Edge Johnny has always steered clear of that. To thee it may seem a distinction without a difference, but I can see one. Roldan in front of me, with a saber in his hand, is fair game; but Roldan with his back to me, and a knife in my fist, is sacred from the blade. Fair play is written all over my record, and I hope they will put it on my tombstone when I pass in my chips. Friend or foe, I meet him squarely; stay with him, or against him, to the end of the chapter."

"And this is the man whom Sanchez suspects?"

Ursola appeared more pleased than angered by the free speech of the sport. Her exclamation was a compliment that was really well merited, and the sport was not wrong when he fancied that it was but the prelude to something of importance.

"Thou art the man for whom I have been looking. Had I known thee sooner neither Sanchez nor Roldan would have been here. To tell the story briefly, the wealth that is in these mines belongs to the female branch of the family, and had been handed down from mother to daughter after a law of our own. The treasure is inexhaustible, and lies ready for the taking; yet, though there can be no question as to our title, we cannot carry things on with as high a hand as we could in the years that are gone. Our army in those times could hold the place against all comers, and the Ranch of the Golden Dream, strong though it appeared, and stoutly as it was held on more than one occasion, was but a blind to hide the fortress in the mountain. At the head

of all this there was always a woman—but she had a trusted lieutenant, who shared the spoils as well as the danger. Those times could come again; and the man I see before me could be that lieutenant."

Atherton answered nothing, though Ursola paused, as if for a word from him, to indicate how he was receiving this revelation. As he remained speechless she again went on:

"Thou hast seen enough to convince thee that this is no idle tale, and now it remains with thee to speak. For the sake of having thy aid I can promise thee the safety of all those in whom thou canst have an interest. When Sanchez retires, as he will if I demand it, Roldan will go with him, so that thou wilt not be asked to do aught underhanded against either. Eleena will return to her ranch—which is hers in the division of the spoils, though in justice she is no tentitled to it—and she may take the Janvins with her. They are nothing to me, and my brother must even make up his mind to release his gripe. After that—after that, remember—thou art to be my best man, here and elsewhere; and if wages be distasteful, then take what share may seem to be just. I am not afraid to trust to thy honesty since I have proved thy honor. Once before I have spoken, and thy answer was, no. This time I have hopes that it will be something else."

"It is a temptation," answered Jack, deliberately, yet looking at the lady with an ardent glance.

"It is worth the considering, and I do not say that I will not accept thy offer; yet, something in my mind tells me that I might ask still more, even though I might be asking without hope. What is a million to a man like me? I am fitted for the life I have been leading, and for none other. In it I have found my happiness, and have never been at a loss for all the means I needed to make it enjoyable. Were I to go elsewhere, even with a million at my command, I would be little better than a gilded fool. The worst of it is that the eyes of no one would be sooner opened to the fact than those very bright ones of thine. That would be the worst of all. Roldan may care little for thy thoughts, but I am not Roldan. If I am with thee it is not for thy wealth."

"Truly, thou art a man worth the having; and if wealth will not buy thee—perhaps I have found my master. Have patience then. Remember that though I have the power it must be exercised with something of caution; and such a bargain as thine must take some time in the closing. Thou hast not said, no, this time; thy, yes, seems to be coming with a vengeance. All the better, since we understand ourselves, and I will know how it is that Sanchez must be talked to. I was not certain heretofore; but now I know. Make thyself at home, here, only, try not to stray away. I can forgive the mistake that led thee hence, once before; but now it would be unpardonable, and might cost thy life. Trust me. I am more than thy friend."

She arose, motioned Atherton back as he made a movement to advance with outstretched hand, and swept from the room.

"The courting may be all on one side; but blest if I wouldn't like to know on which side it is," thought Atherton, when she had departed.

"It looks like the sure enough article, and yet I would wager a thousand that if she has not gone out to poison Eleena it will be to throw the judge into a deeper dungeon. Beautiful demon! if there was any other way to checkmate you I would not be taking this."

The prospect of wealth unbounded, and the friendship of a beautiful woman—perhaps her hand—had no more power to move the sport than the presence of imprisonment or death. He was coolness itself in either or any case, and willing to bide his time and trust to his own good fortune for a happy ending.

Had he followed Ursola he would have smiled to see that she turned and made sure that the fastening of the door was perfect before she made her way on, along the passage. She had not altogether trusted to her warning, and made sure that it would be heeded by the additional injunction of the bolts which he could not help but respect.

Perhaps, though, his smile would not have been so confident had he seen the dark figure that rose up at the door, and shook his fist toward the wall.

"Let him remain there until the end of time! If Roldan can prevent, that door opens not again—at least, while it can let out a living man to come between me and Ursola. The shaft for Roldan; and the wealth and the beauty for the American? Not if I know it. Death for Sanchez; Ursola and the mine for me!"

Then the captain of the rovers, who had overheard every word of the conversation, followed on after the fitting woman, burning to say to her something of what he had in his mind; but unable to speak until he had arranged the plans which were tumbling together in his brain. All told, Sanchez could muster but half a dozen supporters; while he had a score at his back, to say nothing of the men in the mines. What was there to hinder him from working his will?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

GUIDO ON THE WAR-PATH.

THE disappearance of Guido had not been accepted as a matter of course, even if Sanchez made no remarks in regard to it in the presence of the sport, or Eleena. Search was made for him; though without success.

"Since they know not who I am it makes little difference what they suspect as to the presence of another man. Let them have their fill in the search. I will be there before them."

So he thought to himself as he looked back from the higher ground which he had already gained.

"And even if they had seen Gabriel the avenger it would be safe for them to come face to face with Natan of the mines. Since her steel touched me the woman hath forgotten, and the others know not. A bold face, now; for either the end is near or all is lost."

Guido rightly judged that the forces of Roldan had been drawn upon for the pursuit which had been made, and that the nearer he got to the mine the less would be the danger of discovery, so long as he avoided the one or two important posts. This he knew how to do; and once within the inner lines he feared nothing, since he then dropped the role of Guido, and became the worker of the mine, such as he was when met by the sport in the level below. His very boldness insured his success, and, as he had threatened, he was in the mine before Sanchez and his recaptured prisoners.

Although he suspected that the little passage no longer held Morgiana, he turned his steps in that direction first of all. He had his own affairs to look after, but they could wait. He would not have left her in such a horrible predicament for a moment longer than was necessary, even if it wrecked his own hopes of vengeance to interfere. It was on her account that he stole away during the absence of the sport; and glad enough he was that he had done so, when he saw the little party once more in the hands of Sanchez. The coolness with which the sport accepted the change in the position, had both angered and puzzled him, for he had expected to see anything rather than this calm submission, which had something of a suspicious look.

Wandering in the darkness of the passages, guided by the faintest of gleams from the lantern, which he held himself ready to extinguish at any moment, was slow work, and it took long for Guido to reach the rear entrance to the mine.

He found it closed; but when he had opened the way there was no trace of the girl. Had he been somewhat sooner in reaching the spot he might have come face to face with Sanchez, passing through the doorway with his prisoners.

He left the way open, and turned once more into the mine.

"It is as I suspected. They know the secret of the passage now, if never before; and henceforth it will scarcely be a safe trail to follow. Wonder it is there is no guard; though, perhaps, they rely on the bolt on the inner side. Now, I will find the prisoners if it can be done. I suspect that the American has yielded somewhat to the witchery of the woman, yet I would know; and for the others, they need my aid. In making their cause mine I further my own."

Acting on this he returned into the mine, or rather the passages which led to it, thinking first of all to seek the sport, whom he believed he would be able to find.

When he came to the place of which he was in search, he caught sight of a sudden gleam of light, that made him hastily conceal the lantern by which he had been guiding his own steps, and gaze eagerly at the figure in the distance.

Although he had no view of her face, he was at no loss to recognize Ursola—and this time beyond a doubt.

With his eyes fixed upon her he advanced rapidly, noting that she was in haste, and not likely to turn around. His footfalls gave forth no sound, and he was sure that were she even to suspect his presence the darkness would tell her nothing, if she looked in his direction. Of the possibility of there being some one in his rear he did not think, for he knew that this part of the mine was visited but seldom by Roldan, and never at all by his rovers, or by the men who worked in the newer levels. He was taken wholly by surprise when he felt a hand drop heavily on his shoulder, while at the same time a sword's point sought his side.

"Hist! On thy life, not a word above a whisper! Who art thou?"

Some one else was on the track of the woman with the lantern; and Guido, almost sure that he recognized, even in that whisper, the tones of Roldan, answered promptly:

"I am Natan, of the lower drift; and if thou art the master, Rafael sent me to say that—"

"To the fiend with Rafael! If thou art a fellow from the mines it may be that thou canst be trusted; and thou canst not harm. I have need of thee. Follow, and on thy life be silent. There is gold in this for thee; or, if thou art false, death."

With Roldan, save as the supposed friend of Sanchez and Ursola, Guido had no quarrel, and he was willing enough to follow, though he had

his own idea of the extent to which he could be trusted. He was glad that his half-begun explanation had been accepted without further question, since he had his doubts whether it would have proved satisfactory, and he simply muttered something about his willingness to be of service, and suffered himself to be led along. It would be time enough to risk that sword-point at his back when he knew what further assistance might be desired of him.

His coolness saved him from suspicion. There was no opportunity for conversation, but the readiness with which he fell in by the side of Roldan spoke for him, and a slight noise told that the outlaw had returned his saber to its sheath.

They had not gone far when Roldan tightened his hold upon the shoulder of his involuntary companion, and brought him to a halt. The light had disappeared, and they were within a short distance of the apartment which the rover knew was occupied only by Sanchez.

For some little time they remained there, silently waiting. Then the door, opening again, let out a ray of light into the passage; and in its glow the two watchers could see Sanchez.

He stepped out in haste, and went on down the corridor.

For an instant Roldan appeared to be undecided. Then he hastily whispered into the ear of Guido:

"Remain here until I return, or some one comes to thee from me. If the woman we saw comes out, follow her with care; see whither she goes; and if any one meets her, hear, if possible what is said. As the work is done so will be the reward or the punishment. There can be no trifling with Roldan."

"Natan understands; and will do the work. If she leaves here he will not lose sight of her."

Roldan gave no answer. Sanchez was already some distance down the passage, and the outlaw hurried away in his wake. As he went, something came between Guido and the light, and he thought that he could catch the gleam of the sword which had but lately been at his own back.

For some time the watcher crouched in the darkness, his eyes directed toward the door through which he had seen Ursola disappear. He was faithful to his task—though not for threat or promise of Roldan.

The thing that troubled Guido most was to know what were the intentions of the rover. Was he going to use that blade on Sanchez? Would he but follow him far enough to make sure that he was well out of the way? Was there to be war in the mine; and if so would it be safe to wait for Roldan to show his hand?

All the time he was thinking of these things he was also thinking of something else. He had seen Ursola enter; and was sure that she had not departed. Was she alone there?

He grew angry with himself for his loss of time; and when, after perhaps five minutes of waiting, there was no sign of the return of either Roldan or Sanchez, he advanced to the door, and tried it.

The bolts were unsprung, and the heavy door swung so lightly that it yielded to his touch. Without hesitation he stepped boldly forward, and entered the room.

Within, there was a lamp burning brilliantly, and he could see to the remotest corner of the apartment.

It was empty.

The knife which had been in his hand went back to its sheath, and he turned away without further search.

"It will be after this if we catch the witch asleep. There is some other passage which she has reached, and by this time has gone on her way. Wherever it may lead to it is a wicked one; and sooner or later Guido will find it. The hour has not yet come; though, for a moment it seemed as though the fates had given her into my hand at last. It must be by my hands alone. More than once I might have slain her from a distance; but that would be poor reward for all this waiting. She must know who gives the blow, and why it falls. Let Roldan finish his watch himself; I will try another venture."

He came out from the room, and hurried along, following the course the rover had taken; but with an objective point already fixed in his mind. He believed that great events were on the tapis; and was certain that he would have a hand in them.

CHAPTER XXXV.

REVENGE BITES BOTH WAYS.

IT WAS NO GREAT trouble to follow on the trail of Sanchez; and the chase led the captain straight to the quarters occupied by the Janvrians.

If Gilt-Edge Johnny had been remanded to his old apartment it had not been so with the judge, who was much more comfortably located, and after a few moments there he had been joined by Morgiana, brought in by a silent guard, and left without a word of explanation.

Of course, it had been a shock for the girl to see her father again, since she had been hoping that he had slaved the grasp of his enemy, and had made his escape altogether. There was a certain amount of satisfaction, however, in

having him near, and with the courage which she had all along displayed she made no outcry or moan, since their circumstances had been bettered to a certain extent. A light had been left with them, and there was a meal on a table, that could have been partaken of with some relish had not appetite been wanting.

When the judge had recovered some little from his fatigue he seemed none the worse for his journey. Indeed, if anything, he was the better for it. He was stronger than she had hoped to see him; and in his very sanest mood, though he was not able to give any connected explanation of what had happened to him after she had dropped back and closed the door between herself and the outside world. She did not weary him with questions, but watched him dutifully while he rested. He was sleeping when Sanchez entered.

At sight of him Morgiana sprang in front of her father with a low cry of alarm. Her arm might be powerless to protect, yet she placed herself on guard and nervously awaited the words of her visitor. That they would be taunt or threat she could well believe.

They proved to be neither. There was a weary smile on his face as he waved his hand with what might have been a deprecatory gesture.

"Have no fear of me, and forget what I have said to thee in my wrath. It was all a mistake—or, at least, fate has been too strong for me. I am powerless to harm, and I am not sure that I would now if I dared. If thy father is able to move, he will go out of this to-morrow, a free man, if thou and he will swear never again to cross my path, or interfere with me and mine. I am something of a surgeon, and have come to look at his hurt, and see if he can be moved as soon as I have said."

"But give us our freedom, and so far as my word will go, I will swear to what you may ask. My father is weak indeed, but rest and nursing in any place outside of this hole will soon restore him. If it be true, what you have just said, I might even find it in my heart to bless you. I know not what has led to this persecution, and I shall not try to remember the ravings of a witless man. Why delay? Let us go at once, and the fresh air will be better than all the salve in the world."

"It is better that thou shouldst know what it was that made me the enemy I have been—and still am. My sister was thy father's wife. He slew her, and I have sought to have my revenge. For reasons which it is not worth while to explain I have promised to forego that intention; and it is even to my interest that I should treat him with kindness during the little time he has to remain here. Forget the words that I have said to thee heretofore, and look upon me as one who has passed out of thy life as much as if I were dead."

The words that were evenly, if not kindly, spoken, confirmed the hope she had been willing to have; and at the same time brought her face to face with the realities that would belong to their position when they were turned out of their dungeon.

"Let it be as you wish—yet where will we go? We know nothing of the way; we have no friends to call upon; it seems that we are in a wilderness. Is it certain that this revenge of yours is not taking a new shape, while remaining just as terrible?"

"Have no fears. That will be provided for. Eleena has not spared herself to find the visitors who were taken from under her roof, and she has followed even here. Some of her men are not far away, and under her protection thou shalt go. But if thou art wise, thou wilt have thy father placed where he can wander less, and be better taken care of. His life and his reason both depend upon it. If the means are wanting, Eleena will furnish them, if thou wilt not accept them from one who has tried his best in the past to harm him. Better be her debtor than leave him to suffer."

While he was speaking, Sanchez approached the judge, and with deft fingers bared the wound of the sleeping man. At the light touch the judge shivered, but did not awake. A knife-blade had bitten deeply across the back of his upper arm, and the wound looked angry and swollen, though without pain.

Sanchez had come prepared to dress it. From his pockets he drew linen and a box of ointment. When he had assured himself of the condition of the cut he smeared a bandage heavily with the ointment, and then applied it to the wound, wrapping around it swiftly another cloth. It took but a brief time to finish the work; and it appeared to be well that it was so, since, as Sanchez stepped back, the judge started up with a sudden, wild cry.

"Take it off! Take it off!" he shrieked, tearing at the cloth.

"It burns me! It burns me like fire! Is this more poison of the witch's brewing?"

"Fear nothing," said Sanchez, turning toward the girl.

"It will burn for the moment, but it is only the ointment taking hold. In a short time the pain will be gone, and the inflammation which has been silently sapping his strength will disappear. I leave the salve with thee—"

use it night and morning, and all will go well with him."

The knot that held the cloth was on the under side of the arm, and the judge had some trouble to find it, for his fingers fumbled but awkwardly. He was not yet accustomed to the use of his left hand. When he tore at the cloth the pain of the hurt was the greater, and he fell back again with an inarticulate moan, his eyes never having rested on Sanchez.

"Remember what I have told thee," said the latter to Morgiana, in a low tone, as he waved his hand in adieu, and turning left the cell.

As he passed through the doorway he felt a sudden tug at his belt, and made an instinctive snatch—but too late. The keen knife of Roldan had divided it, and at the same time his other hand gave it a toss into the darkness.

"Thou hast bargained to give him his life; yet have mixed in his wound that which in the far off end will slay. What poison thou hast brewed for the mistress of the ranch I know not; but that it will be death who can doubt? Then, Roldan to the shaft, and Ursola to—what? Thou hast made a beginning—no danger is there that there will be a halt until thy greed has been crammed to its utmost. Roldan was good enough to open the mines which had been half ruined while they lay idle; but when the ore was reached he could retire. Such have been thy thoughts; but Roldan is too wise to wait. Since he has seen the first blow fall, not another moment will he delay his own stroke. It is not far to the shaft that thou hast showed me; and there thou must die."

While he spoke the Don held the smaller man at arm's length, at the same time hurrying him along in the direction of the shaft.

The distance was not far. Barely beyond the apartment there was a turn to the left. Then, a few paces, and the open chasm. As they went, Sanchez ceased his struggles, and his hand dropped toward the back of the rover. Almost could he reach the belt for which he was feeling. Almost; but not quite.

He gave a spring forward—and at that instant they stood on the brink of the shaft.

Perhaps that fact took the attention of Roldan somewhat away from what his captive was doing. He had his own footing to look after, since a step too far would mean death to both of them. He braced himself and gave a tremendous heave, as he exclaimed:

"Roldan for the shaft—go see how it is thyself!"

The words of Ursola had maddened him so that he could think of no others. This was the beginning of his revenge.

But at the same time the hand of Sanchez shot up, a knife clutched within the fingers; and even as he felt himself being flung outward he struck swiftly at the side of the rover.

With an oath Roldan started back, while a short, shrill scream echoed through the vaults; followed by the roar of many voices, surging through the corridor which Roldan had but lately left.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DAISY COMES IN TIME FOR THE CLIMAX.

WHILE that last cry of Sanchez was ringing along the passage, a woman came with rapid steps as nearly as possible in the direction of the sound.

The woman was Eleena. She had waited for Sanchez to come to her until she could wait no longer, and had left the spot, in spite of the danger which he had cautioned her would attend any movement of hers. Once in the corridor and she could see the light that came from the room in which were the Janvrins, and toward it she had directed her steps. When she reached the open door she halted, for the sound of the coming footsteps grew louder, and she could hear the cry of angry men.

"Death to Roldan! Death to Rafael! Death to the witch! The mines for those who work them!"

So they shouted in a polyglot of tongues; and foremost of all came Pablo, the one-eyed. The men of the mines, the toilers and the slaves, had risen in a revolt, had gained the passage of the underground fortress, and were drifting along in full cry, searching for those whom they had learned to hate.

While Eleena lingered, looking back over her shoulder to learn the cause of the outcry, the door at her hand swung to with a crash; and she was alone with the rebels.

She was alarmed; but she did not finish her folly by attempting to flee. She drew herself up proudly, and waited for whatever was to happen.

The first thing that happened was Pablo. He came with a torch in one hand, and his ready knife in the other. As he caught sight of the female figure in front of him he raised his torch so that the light would fall on the upturned face.

It seemed to him that he recognized it, for he gave a shout of triumph.

"The witch! The witch! I have found her and she is mine! She must die!"

No question how deeply he was in earnest, since the sternest of intention rung in his tones. The knife was dropping, swiftly and sure, when a man who had come just behind him, swung

himself forward, striking as hard as he could let drive.

Then he caught up the torch which Pablo dropped when he went down before that stroke, and wheeling faced the crowd.

"Hold hard, there, all of you. Kill the men as fast as you want to; but when it comes to the women I draw the line!"

His hands had been weaponless, but as he spoke his foot touched something hard, and glancing downward he saw the belt of weapons which Roldan had snatched from the waist of Sanchez. He caught it up, and before the crowd, which had slackened its pace at his stern address, could reach him, he was facing them with a revolver in his hand, and the sword of Sanchez pressed by his thigh against the wall.

One man against scores, he could not have held them there a moment if the rush had fairly begun; but again there was the sound of running footsteps, and two men sprung to his side.

"I'm with you, pard! Hold 'em level; though I wouldn't wonder if there was something of a mistake. Here, you, stand back! Sanchez is dead; Roldan is dying; and we are, or were, but prisoners here, like yourselves. Go your way as soon as you want to; but if you crowd us we will just fill this level up with corpses."

The words of the sport were understood by but few; but the stern look on his face, and the leveled revolvers told about what he meant. As he ceased speaking Guido finished the explanation, in a tongue that all understood. At the same time Jack was making the secret signals taught him by the Talking Feather.

"But the witch must die!" exclaimed some one from the center of the herd.

"This is not the witch, but the witch's victim. If you are men you will help her: if you are hounds you will die in front of her," exclaimed the man who had knocked Pablo out, taking his cue from what Jack had said.

"I have been with you in this, don't force me to fight you now. This is not the way to freedom. Surprise the guard at the mouth of the mine before they know of what has happened, or we are lost."

At last the words had their effect. A dozen men who obeyed the signal of the sport began the backward move, and the others followed, leaving Eleena and her three protectors alone together.

The departure was none too soon, since a moment later Roldan came staggering toward him. One hand was pressed against his side, while the other, trailing along the wall, helped to support him as he came. The Gilt-Edge Sport just had time for a word.

"You may have thought, Daisy, that I was never coming; but you see that I have got here just the same."

Then Roldan broke in, his voice thin and feeble:

"If thou art looking for Sanchez, he can be found at the bottom of the shaft, a dozen steps around yonder angle. Now for Ursola, the traitor! She is the worst of the pair. Strangle her if thou art wise, or she will yet take thy life as she sought to strike at mine. Where is she? Sanchez poisoned the wound of Janvrin, and I doubt not that she is in search of the senora to drive a knife in her heart. Slay her before she works more deadly mischief. She—she—is—the vampire."

"Was!" exclaimed Eleena, in horror at the words of the Don.

"Was—how?" questioned the sport, a light breaking in on his mind.

"Because Sanchez was a woman—because she and Ursola were one!"

As Roldan had told them, they found Sanchez at the bottom of the shaft.

When the sport had brought up the body by means of a rope, lowered by the hands of the others, there was no trouble in recognizing the face, ghastly though it was. The false mustache was gone, and her loosened hair hung over her shoulders in wild confusion. Death seemed to have been instantaneous.

After that no one cared to linger longer. The laborers in revolt might meet with a check when they attacked the guard of rovers at the mouth of the mine, and come swarming back at any moment. Into their hands it would not be altogether safe to fall under such circumstances; and with Guido for a guide they sought the secret exit. It is not necessary to follow them step by step. The Janvrins were of the party, of course; and they reached the camp of Eleena's retainers before morning to find Leon, faithful to his orders, waiting patiently for the return of his mistress. They all moved away to a safe distance from the spot, and then made a long camp. After that they pursued their way to the ranch of the Golden Dream without molestation. For the present the mine and its belongings were abandoned to the insurgents. Little danger was there that they would work any great harm; and to all the spoils they could carry away they were welcome, since their present owner had made good her escape.

Once at the room, and fairly rested, explanations were somewhat in order; and the reader may be interested in the substance of some of them.

Whatever else she may have been—Eleena did not seem to believe strongly in the vampire story, holding that there might be a mistake somewhere—Ursola had undoubtedly been a wicked woman among the wicked; and at one time the wife of Janvrin. The story as told to Atherton in regard to the ownership of the mine having descended from mother to mother was correct, until it reached this generation. Then it remained in the husband of Eleena, and through him descended to her son, unless they were to accept tradition instead of the law of the land. Unfortunately, by the will of her husband, Eleena was compelled to live for five years at the ranch, and to provide for their cousin, Ursola—she and her husband had been cousins before they were man and wife—should she ever come to her for aid or shelter.

Having spent a queenly fortune, Ursola came at last; and came in fear, at first, of the law, on account of crimes that she had committed. She knew more about the family secrets than Eleena had ever guessed at, and was soon the ruling spirit at the ranch, partly through her cruelly wicked courage, and partly through the vague terror that her threats had caused. She had come in the guise of Sanchez; but from time to time she allowed herself to be seen as Ursola, though the few who met her confounded her with the actual mistress of the ranch. She it was who made the contract with Roldan to work the mines of which she had the secret.

Guido has already told his story at sufficient length. That he did not adhere altogether to the truth when he was found in the vaults by the sport was a frailty for which he could be pardoned, since he did not know to whom he was speaking. He came to the neighborhood of the ranch in pursuit of the vampire, and found her, though he dallied somewhat too long with his revenge. He could give no explanation of the burial on the mountain-side, save that Ursola had before that seen him at times in a cabin where he was not so much hiding as biding his time, to become sure that he was on the right track. Thinking that he was dumb, and unable to write, she had marked him down as a possible helper; and finally had employed him to aid her in ridding herself of the body. Afterward she suspected him, why could not be guessed, and led him into the dungeon to die. Her victim was probably a girl upon whom she had tried the poisons she brewed. Such a young woman had been missing from the hut of a peon, but how she came to fall into the hands of Ursola was never told.

Gilt-Edge Johnny and the Daisy took their meeting quite as a matter of course, and wasted little time over mutual admiration. The Daisy had been consigned to the care of Rafael, and set to work with the others. He had helped Pablo to stir up the revolt, followed him in the rush, and knocked him down without a qualm, when he saw him about to strike at the life of a woman.

The Janvrins remained at the ranch for some time, until the judge had quite recovered his health; and almost the balance of his mind. The single application of the poison to his wound did him no harm, since it had been almost instantly washed away; and when he understood that the woman he had imagined he had killed was dead, but not by his hand, he was able to get well without much delay. He finally took Morgiana and went back to his home in the East. He had a fortune there, and now that he was able to claim and enjoy it without fear, he had no desire to wander through the wilderness.

The Gilt-Edge Sport had little to say about Ursola. In his mind there was no doubt but that he had fascinated the feminine fiend; and he could understand why she had made him overhear that mythical conversation before she endeavored to come to an understanding with him. He had played fast and loose with her, but that was part of the game; and she had certainly not been keeping faith with him, though, as he told the Daisy the only time he ever spoke of the matter to him, if he had played his cards for all that was in them he had no doubt that he would have been a million to the good.

As Roldan died before the party left the mine, he had been left there, side by side with the fictitious Sanchez, to be buried when the mine was revisited.

Atherton and his pard remained at the ranch for some time as visitors. Eleena convinced Jack that the time was not far distant when she would have need of him, since she intended to see what there was in the mine, and there was no one else so fit to bring it out. For the Daisy, she had gratitude and friendship, since he had undoubtedly saved her life when he struck Pablo down. Eventually she enlisted them in her service as her right-hand men, and under their guidance and management she worked the mine to much profit. What may happen when the five years mentioned in the will of her departed husband have elapsed is not yet sufficiently indicated to allow much plain speaking on the subject, yet it might not be a guess to go wide of the mark if one were to say that the Gilt-Edge Sport may shortly thereafter be more than a million to the good.

THE END.

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